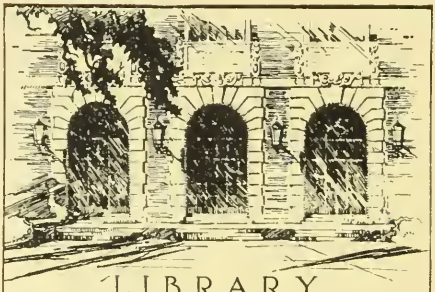

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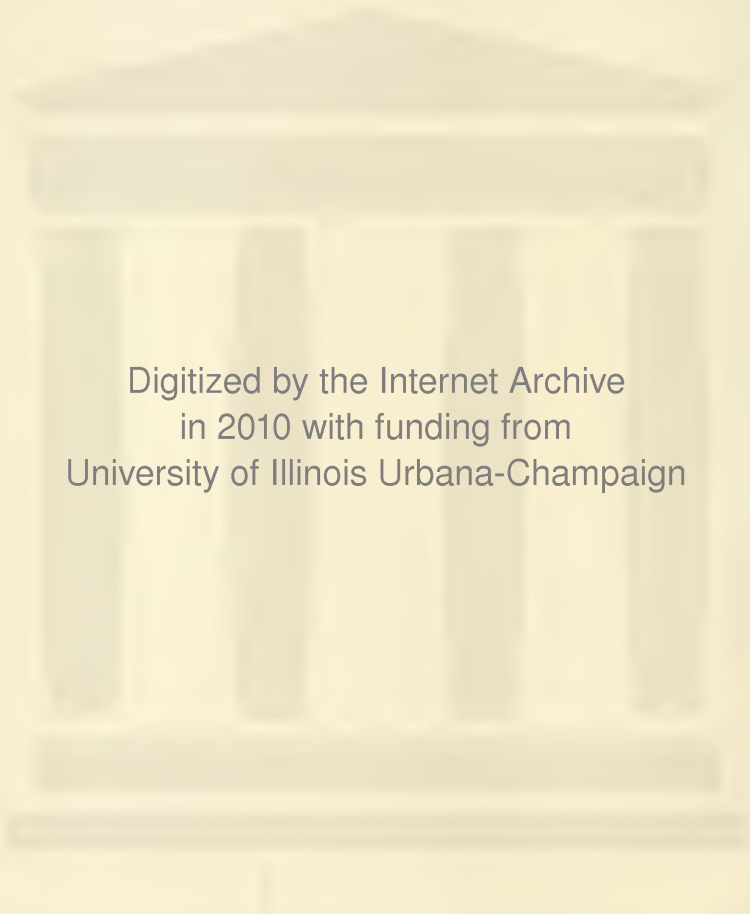

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THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WEHR-WOLF," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "THE PIXY," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE BRONZE STATUE," &c.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

DRAWN BY HENRY ANELAY, AND ENGRAVED BY E. HOOPER.

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THE MYSTERIES

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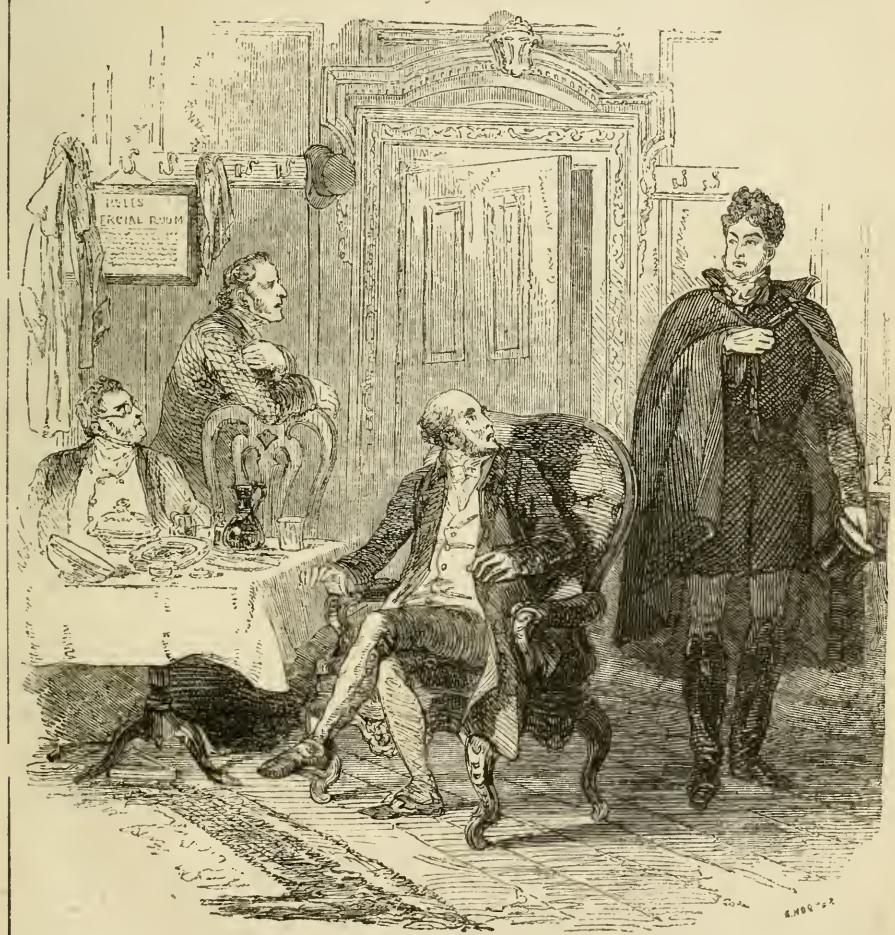


CHAPTER I.

THE CATALOGUE OF CRIMES.

Our narrative opens in the month of January, 1795, —a date belonging to one of the most eventful periods in the history of Great Britain, or indeed of Europe.

At that time King George III was in the thirty-fifth year of his reign; and his scape-grace son, the Prince of Wales, was already verging towards that important climacteric which is generally denominated "the prime of life"—his age being thirty-three.

Pitt was then in power; the Reign of Terror had

just closed in Paris, leaving the French Republic in the hands of the Jacobins and the Thermidorians;—and the English armies, under the Duke of York, had reaped nothing but disgrace from the previous campaigns in the Netherlands.

The memorable trial of Warren Hastings was then in progress: that of Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall, the people's staunch champions, had recently terminated in a glorious triumph.

The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended: for democratic opinions were spreading rapidly throughout England—and the doctrine of "the divine right of Kings" was falling to a miserable discount.

The Ministers were demanding more money to carry on the war against France;—Wilberforce was agitating the question of the slave-trade:—and the approaching marriage of the Prince of Wales with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick had been announced to the nation.

This rapid glance at the state of political affairs will not only give the reader an idea of the interesting period at which our tale commences, but is likewise in certain points an indispensable preface to the incidents that are to follow.

It was, then, in the beginning of January, 1795, and on a fine frosty evening, that a number of bagmen, or commercial travellers, were assembled round a blazing fire and sipping their hot toddy in the room especially set apart for their accommodation at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

Some of them were about to depart that very night upon their journeys in various directions: others had just returned from long tours, and were felicitating themselves on the prospect of a few weeks' holiday. Those who were on the point of setting out, were already equipped to encounter the nipping chill of the weather, save in respect to their heavy great-coats which hung to the pegs in the apartment; while those who had come home again, were indulging in the luxurious indolence of dressing-gowns and slippers.

The conversation was general: for the bag-men, frequenting that tavern, were all well known to each other—and even when a new-comer in the "profession" appeared amongst them, their convivial heartiness of disposition and frank hospitality of character soon placed him on terms of ease and familiarity. For there is no class of men more generous nor more intellectual and enlightened, taking them as a body, than that of commercial travellers.

It was between six and seven o'clock on the evening of which we are speaking, and the bag-men were in the middle of a warm though perfectly good-tempered discussion on some political subject, when the door opened, and a short, thin man, who looked like a locomotive mummy, so completely was he enveloped in great-coats and "comforters," bustled into the room.

"Holloa, Page—old fellow—how are you?" exclaimed every voice simultaneously; and the demand was made with a heartiness of tone and manner which indicated how welcome was the presence of this new arrival to the travellers already assembled at the George and Blue Boar.

"As well as ever, and as hungry as a hunter," responded Mr. Page, who, by the assistance of the active waiter, immediately began to extricate himself from the mass of upper clothing which he wore. "But it is a precious sharp evening, I can tell you! The roads are as hard as iron, and the air is what might be called quite *crisp*. Now, John," he continued, as he threw aside the large woollen article that had enveloped his neck, turning at the same time towards the waiter whom he thus addressed, "get me a nice steak and oyster sauce; and send *Boots* with a pair of slippers."

"Yes, sir," replied the waiter, immediately afterwards disappearing to execute the commissions specified.

Room was now made for Mr. Page near the fire; and, having taken his seat, he held his hands close to the cheerful grate until a genial warmth began to pervade his form. He was a man of about five-and-forty, with a thin, sallow, and angular countenance, small restless grey eyes, and a good set of teeth. His forehead was remarkably high, and his head was bald on the crown; but on each side the bushy iron grey hair stuck out, mingling with the whiskers which, of a somewhat darker hue, met underneath his chin. His entire appearance gave the idea of one of that bustling kind of persons who are remarkably shrewd in matters of business and know tolerably well how to take care of "Number One."

"Where do you come from to-day, Page?" inquired the commercial traveller who had made room for him near the fire, and next to whom he was therefore seated.

"I slept at Aylesbury last night, and started for town at nine this morning," was the answer. "Forty good miles is not such a bad day's work, I take it: but you know that I don't drive the worst bit of horse-flesh on the road. I've been out for the last four months, and have not been idle, I can assure you. There are few places in all the Midland counties that I have not visited; and I think that my governors, Hodson and Morley, will be pretty well satisfied when I call upon them in Wood Street to-morrow morning with all the fresh orders I have got and the monies I have collected."

"Any news up Aylesbury way?" asked one of the travellers. "I am well acquainted with all that part of Buckinghamshire, and feel an interest in it."

"Then perhaps you know Sir Richard Stamford—eh?" exclaimed Page, becoming suddenly excited, as if he had something of importance to communicate, and which was at that moment revived in his memory.

"I can't say that I ever saw Sir Richard, to my knowledge," answered the individual who had previously spoken: "but I know him by name and all about him, as well as we may be aware of everything in the life of King George himself, without ever having seen his Majesty."

"Then you doubtless consider Sir Richard Stamford to be a very wealthy man?" cried Mr. Page: "and may be you have heard that he is a good husband and deeply attached to his beautiful wife?"

"Those are precisely the opinions I have formed of him," was the reply. "His country seat is about three miles from Aylesbury; and I never was in that town without hearing the people speaking about him—aye, and most favourably too. He is reported to spend a deal of money in the place, and to do a world of good in the shape of charity. Besides, he has a large share in Ramsey and Martin's bank, which is noted for the accommodation it affords the tradesmen of the town and the farmers in all that district of Bucks."

"Is n't it wonderful," exclaimed Page, his sallow

countenance assuming a mysterious aspect, while all his listeners gazed upon him in mingled curiosity and amazement,—"is n't it wonderful," he repeated, "how the world *may* be deceived by outward appearances—and how a man *may* pass off for years as a saint, whereas in his heart he is a very demon all the time?"

"But what has all this to do with Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded several voices.

"What has it all to do with *him?*" cried Page, casting a still more solemn and mysterious glance around upon the company: "why, just this—that when I came down to breakfast in the coffee-room at the inn where I put up at Aylesbury, I heard that the whole town was in consternation; for such a complication of crimes ——"

"Crimes!" repeated several of the commercial travellers, drawing their chairs nearer to the speaker.

"What?—and in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded the individual who had previously expressed his interest in all that concerned Aylesbury.

"Yes—crimes, and in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford," resumed Page: "for this baronet who, as our friend here just now stated, was famous for his charities and was a sleeping-partner in the principal bank in the place—this gentleman of whom every body entertained such a high opinion——"

"Well—well: what has he done?" cried several impatient voices.

"Rather ask me what he has *not* done," said Page: "for surely all possible crimes are summed up in fraud—forgery—murder—and arson!"

"Good heaven!" ejaculated the bag-men, literally bounding upon their chairs; while the sentiments of horror, amazement, doubt, and curiosity congealed into lines on all their countenances: "you cannot be in earnest!"

"I never was more in earnest in my life, friends," responded Page, emphatically.

"But explain—tell us how it happened," exclaimed one.

"So many crimes!" observed another.

"And all to be perpetrated by one man!" cried a third.

"It is scarcely probable!" remarked a fourth.

"You will cease to be sceptical when you see tomorrow morning's newspapers," said Page, shaking his head solemnly. "I tell you that Sir Richard Stamford, baronet," he continued in a measured and decisive tone, "has taken in every tradesman at Aylesbury—committed endless forgeries on the bank in which he is a partner—assassinated his beautiful wife—and set fire to his own splendid country-seat."

"God help us!" cried many voices.

"I did not succeed in obtaining many particulars relative to this fearful catalogue of crimes," continued Mr. Page; "for the persons with whom I conversed in the coffee-room at Aylesbury, were all talking at once, each giving his own version of the complicated affair, and every one of these tales differing from the rest. But the outline of the dreadful tragedy appeared to be something in this shape,—that Mr. Martin, one of the banking-firm being absent, Mr. Ramsey, the other partner, discovered last evening the forgeries which Sir Richard Stamford had committed,—that he went straight off to Stamford Manor to demand explanations, but that the baronet being out at the time, he communicated the object of his visit to Lady Stamford,—that a little after midnight Sir Richard returned home, and was assailed by violent reproaches on the part of Mr. Ramsey and bitter upbraidings from her ladyship, who was half distracted at the terrible discovery of her husband's guilt,—and that in his rage the baronet forcibly expelled Ramsey from the house, killed his wife in a paroxysm of fury, and having set fire to the Manor, doubtless for the purpose of concealing the deed of blood, immediately absconded."

"The man must be a perfect monster!" ejaculated the commercial traveller who was so well acquainted with Aylesbury. "I have often seen Mr. Ramsey at the bank: he is a handsome young man of some eight or nine and twenty, and very affable. At his father's death he became head of the firm, and is universally beloved in the town and district."

"I suppose there will be a reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet?" observed another of the bag-men,

"Of course there will," responded Mr. Page;—"and a full description of his person will be published."

"Have you ever seen him?" inquired the previous speaker.

"Two or three times," answered Page. "He bears a remarkable likeness to the Royal Family; and people *do* say that when his Gracious Majesty was Prince of Wales and so mysteriously connected with the beautiful Quakeress Hannah Lightfoot——"

The remainder of the sentence was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the waiter laden with the dinner which Mr. Page had ordered; and as this worthy gentleman had been rendered almost ravenous by the sharp frosty air, he desisted from farther observations in order to address himself to the succulent steak, rich oyster-sauce, and smoking potatoes which were now served up.

The presence of the waiter reminded those bag-men who were to set out that evening of the necessity of calling for their bills without delay; and the conversation relative to the tragical occurrences near Aylesbury was accordingly interrupted by the bustle attendant on settling scores, remunerating waiters and chamber-maids, putting on great-coats and comforters, filling flasks with brandy, lighting cigars, shaking hands with those who remained behind, and all the usual ceremonies attendant upon departure.

At length the room was cleared of two-thirds of the commercial travellers; and as some of those who had just returned from their journeys were compelled to retire to their chambers in order to prepare their accounts and papers for inspection by their employers on the morrow, Mr. Page shortly found himself left with only two companions out of a dozen.

With those friends however he presently renewed the conversation, one of them having asked him what he was about to say when the appearance of the waiter had interrupted him.

"Oh! I remember the topic on which I was speaking," exclaimed the talkative Mr. Page, pushing away his plate after having made a hearty dinner: "I was going to observe that when his Majesty was Prince of Wales, he became connected with a certain Quakeress, named Hannah Lightfoot. Some say he privately married her; and it has also been rumoured

that there was a son born. This child—according to the same vague authority—was secretly removed to the house of the late Sir William and Lady Stamford and adopted by them, her ladyship's own infant happening to die at the period. All this I heard at Aylesbury—but of course I don't pretend in any way to vouch for it."

"I should think not, indeed!" exclaimed a gentleman who, entering the apartment at the instant, but unperceived by the commercial travellers, had caught the latter portion of Mr. Page's observations.

The bag-men started as those words, uttered in a tone of mingled imperiousness and contempt, fell upon their ears; and turning round they beheld the new-comer from whose lips the disdainful remark had fallen.

He was an individual of remarkably imposing appearance. His features were handsome, though his countenance was now evidently flushed with wine: his figure was tall, well proportioned, and commanding:—and in his gait and gestures there was an easy elegance combined with a nobility of air which bespoke the polished gentleman. The intellectuality of his face would have however been somewhat marred by its roundness, the gracefulness of the oval being destroyed by the fatness of the cheeks,—had not the high and open forehead redeemed the fault. His hair was of that uncertain colour which appears of a dark chesnut in some lights, and auburn in others; and it was naturally curled and wavy. His age seemed to be a few years over thirty; and his attire was neat, good, but unpretending.

Such was the individual who made the above-mentioned remark as he entered the commercial-room at the George and Blue Boar; and taking off his hat, cloak, and warm gloves, he seated himself at a table.

Almost immediately afterwards the waiter made his appearance with a steaming tumbler of rum-punch, which the gentleman had ordered as he passed the bar.

But from the first instant that the stranger had met the eyes of Mr. Page, this worthy individual had not ceased to stare at him. It was not however with the offensive gaze of impertinent curiosity; nor was it the rude survey of coarse vulgarity:—but it was the fixed contemplation of one who is suddenly struck by a resemblance, and who fancies he knows the object of his scrutiny, yet on the other hand feels almost certain that he must be mistaken.

At this juncture the other two commercial travellers, rose and retired; and Mr. Page was left alone with the stranger.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLIGHT AND THE PURSUIT.

We should observe that hitherto the gentleman whom we are still compelled to denominate "the stranger," had not noticed the searching earnestness of gaze with which the bag-man regarded him: indeed, no sooner had he taken his seat at the table, when he appeared to fall into a profound reverie,—as if totally forgetting the observation he had made on entering—the words which had elicited it—and the presence of any one else in the room.

Mr. Page, feeling that his survey of the stranger would be deemed an impertinence, if remarked, turned towards the fire, which he poked vigorously then he took a few sips of whiskey-and-water, and tried to make himself comfortable. But there was a feeling of uneasiness upon him, which rapidly grew more painful; and in a few minutes he found that he was again staring at the gentleman more intently than at first.

"It is impossible that I can be mistaken," thought the bewildered commercial traveller, fidgetting in his chair; "and yet it is equally impossible that I can be right. *He* would never come into a public room in this manner—particularly so soon after the event. Nevertheless, the likeness is striking! The same hair—the same high and open forehead—the same stature—the same well-proportioned form! Upon my soul it is very puzzling,—and very, very disagreeable."

Having reached this point in his reflections, he rang the bell violently and ordered his glass to be replenished. The waiter was evidently astonished at the excitement manifested in the summons, and begged submissively to know "whether the last tumbler was to Mr. Page's liking?" The reply was given in the affirmative; and the functionary departed with his feelings considerably relieved by the assurance—for he had begun to fancy that something had occurred to annoy one of his master's best customers.

On his return with the hot toddy, the waiter found Mr. Page gazing with painful earnestness upon the strange gentleman, who, still unconscious of the attention which his presence thus excited, was now listlessly sipping his rum-punch and looking up in a vacant manner at a picture of a sea-fight suspended between the windows.

"John," said the commercial traveller, in a low and scarcely audible tone, as he mysteriously beckoned the waiter close up to him;—then, casting a furtive glance towards the stranger, he demanded laconically, "Who is that gentleman?"

"I really don't know, sir," was the reply, also delivered in a whisper. "But master seemed to recognise him when he ordered his rum-punch at the bar."

"Then go and ask your master who he is, John," responded Mr. Page.

The waiter glided out of the room with the quick and noiseless step peculiar to his fraternity; and the commercial traveller said to himself, as he stirred his whiskey-toddy, "Now I shall have all my doubts cleared up—or my suspicions confirmed."

But Mr. Page was doomed to experience disappointment, and to be plunged back into the bewilderment from which he sought to emancipate himself: for the waiter returned, with a solemn countenance; and while affecting to be busily engaged in poking the fire,—as the stranger was now looking in that direction,—he said in a low and mysterious whisper, "Please, sir, master told me to mind my own business and not ask impertinent questions."

"Then it must be as I thought!" murmured Mr Page; and he mechanically turned round to take another survey of the object of his attention, when he encountered the steady and almost haughty gaze of that gentleman's full blue eyes. The commercial traveller quailed beneath the look, in which there was something so confident, proud, and self-sufficient that all the man's doubts again sprung up in his mind, and with renewed force: for he though

within himself, "*That* is not the air of a guilty person!"

Still there was something strange and mysterious in the cold and haughty silence which the gentleman preserved: for the travellers' room at a commercial inn was a place whence frigid ceremony was banished, and where the formality of an introduction was not regarded as a necessary preliminary to conversation.

As these reflections passed through the mind of Mr. Page, he suddenly recollected that the stranger *had* made an observation when he first entered the apartment,—an observation, too, that was at least contemptuous, if not absolutely rude. "I should think not, indeed!" was the remark that had fallen from the gentleman's lips; and it was in reference to certain words which Page was uttering at the time.

The commercial traveller accordingly resolved upon making an attempt to draw the stranger into conversation; and, with a short prefatory cough, he said, "A very cold evening, sir."

"Very," was the laconic answer; and the gentleman moved half round in his seat—not absolutely turning his back upon Mr. Page, but just giving him so much of the cold shoulder as to intimate pretty plainly that he did not wish to enter into conversation with him.

The bag-man bit his lip: then, suddenly mustering up all his courage, he rose from his chair—approached the table at which the gentleman was seated—and, looking him fully in the face, said, "I beg your pardon, sir—but have I not had the pleasure of seeing you before?"

"Nothing is more probable, sir," answered the gentleman, in a haughty tone, and with knitting brows: "but I should imagine that the mere fact of my presence here, would of itself indicate my desire to remain unnoticed and unrecognised."

"I should think so too," ejaculated Page, with an abruptness that perfectly astounded the gentleman. "The first moment you entered the room, a suspicion of who you were flashed to my mind—and now your own words have banished all my doubts."

The stranger had risen indignantly from his seat in the midst of these observations, to which he seemed prepared to give some cutting reply; but Page, having thus hastily blurted forth the words that came uppermost at the instant, rushed from the room.

"The unmannerly cur!—the rude boor!" exclaimed the gentleman aloud, while rage was depicted in every lineament of his flushed and heated countenance. "Fool that I was to come hither—and thus risk discovery!"

Then, without farther hesitation, he threw on his hat and cloak; and drawing up the collar of the latter so as to conceal his countenance as much as possible, he hastily quitted the apartment.

In the meantime Mr. Page had rushed, with frantic excitement, to the landlord, whom he chanced to find alone in the bar-parlour.

"Do you know whom you have in the house at this moment?" demanded the commercial traveller panting for breath.

"Yes, sir—I do," was the cool reply: "but I also know that he does not wish to be recognised. For when he passed the bar, perceiving that I was aware of who he was, he made me a sign——"

"Perdition on the sign!" interrupted Mr. Page, angrily: "are you a man and a true Briton—and can you remain idly here, while such a person is beneath your roof?"

"If he chooses to come *incognito*," said the landlord, now growing irritated in his turn, "what business is it to you or me, I should like to know?"

"Business!—but there he goes, by heaven?" vociferated the excited commercial traveller, catching a glimpse through the bar-windows of the rapidly retreating form of the gentleman in his capacious cloak.

And in another minute Mr. Page was bounding after him.

But tripping over a mat in the passage, he fell heavily; and rising with difficulty—for he was seriously bruised in his officious haste to perform what he deemed to be a duty owing to society—he observed at a glance that the gentleman in the cloak had succeeded in effecting his escape from the house.

Scarcely, however, had he ascertained this fact when two stout, seedily-dressed men, each carrying a short thick ash-stick in his hand, entered the tavern; and as they crossed the threshold, one observed to the other, "We'd better not say at fust that we're constables, Bill."

"Constables!—are you constables?" cried Page, darting forward, in spite of his bruises: then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, "Because if you are, I can guess your errand and can give you some information."

"Well—don't speak so loud about it, sir, if you please," growled one of the men; "'cos vy, d'ye see, when once it gets known in a large place of this kind that there's peace-officers on the scent the indiwidual wanted finds a many ways of escaping."

"Come along with me, my friends—one moment—and I shall be ready," said Page, sinking his voice to a whisper though speaking hurriedly; and he conducted them into the commercial room.

Having rung the bell and ordered his boots—for it will be remembered that he had betaken himself to the luxury of slippers on his arrival,—he observed in a hasty tone of interrogatory to the officers, "The Aylesbury business—eh?"

"Just so," was the equally laconic reply; and the man who gave it pulled out a printed paper offering *a hundred pounds' reward for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.*

"One glance at it, if you please!" cried Page, snatching the bill out of his hand: then rapidly casting his eyes over the description given of the baronet's person, he continued, speaking in quick, jerking, and disjointed sentences,—"Ah! I thought I was right—I knew I couldn't be mistaken! Tall—well-formed—rather stout—walks very upright—imposing gait—commanding mien—dark auburn hair—handsome countenance—blue eyes—rather florid complexion—fine teeth. That's it—the baronet to a tittle! But here's the *Boots.*"

With these words Mr. Page returned the bill to the constable and seized his boots from the hands of the hotel-functionary named; then, imperiously signalling that individual to leave the room, he hastily equipped himself for the purpose of accompanying the officers.

"If we happen to meet the landlord in the passage, my friends," he observed in a rapid tone, "we won't let him know who *you* are or what you

want: because I have seen enough to convince me that he is favourably inclined towards the baronet—and there's no saying how he may find means of sending him notice of what's going on, should we fail in capturing the villain to-night."

"All right," returned the officers: and away they went in company with Page, whose *sense of duty towards society* was wonderfully sharpened by the reward offered for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.

Close by there was a hackney-coach stand; and the commercial traveller walked straight up to the waterman, and put a crown into his hand, saying, "My good fellow, a gentleman in a cloak took a vehicle here a few minutes ago—I am sure he did: now, where did he order the driver to take him?"

"All right, sir—Edgeware Road," replied the waterman, joyfully pocketting the welcome gift. "'Twas a yaller jarvey ——"

"Look alive, then!" interrupted the active Mr. Page, as he sprang into a coach the door of which he hastily opened himself; and the constables having tumbled in after him, he exclaimed, "Edgeware Road—and a guinea for the jarvey if he catches up the other vehicle."

This exciting promise was instantaneously communicated to the driver by the waterman, who in equally succinct terms gave such information as enabled that functionary to comprehend which coach it was that was now to be pursued; and away went the equipage at a rattling pace.

"It wasn't a bad dodge of mine to commence inquiries at the coach-stand," observed Mr. Page to the constables, as they rolled along towards Oxford Street: "for may I be hanged if I knew which direction the fugitive took when he quitted the hotel."

"Oh! then he *was* at the George—eh?" exclaimed one of the constables; and turning to his comrade, he said, "So you see our information was right, Bill, arter all. But how was it, sir," he continued, again addressing himself to Page, "that you didn't collar him, if so be you twigged him there?"

"I can assure you that my palms itched to clutch him," replied the commercial traveller: "but I wasn't certain that he was really the man, and I was fearful of getting myself into a scrape by seizing the wrong one. Assault, battery, false imprisonment, defamation, and all that sort of thing, you know, kept rising up in my mind and restraining my arm."

"Lord bless ye, sir, if we was to be on'y half so partickler as that, we should never do no bisness," said the constable: "should us, Bill Sneesby?"

"You're about right, Mr. Grint," responded the individual thus blandly appealed to. "Our way is to knock folks down fust and take 'em up arterwards. If so be we've nailed the right uns, then there's no harm done: but if so be we've got the wrong sow by the ear, we apologises—and there's an end on't."

"And suppose that in this last case," observed Mr. Page, "the innocent persons whom you've treated so roughly, don't choose to be satisfied with an excuse?"

"Then we locks 'em up for interfering with us in the execution of our dooty," was Grint's prompt reply.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the commercial traveller, whose opinion of the morality of the two constables was not improved by this avowal: wishing, therefore, to change the conversation,—which, we should observe, he had himself frequently interrupted by thrusting his head forth from the window to see if the yellow coach was in sight,—he said, "I suppose you are constables from Aylesbury?"

"Just so, sir," replied Grint: "and on coming up to town just now, we happened to meet a friend of our'n wot lives at Aylesbury and had been in London for the last week or so. Well, we got into talk together—and then we had summut to drink—and it was nat'ral enough that me and my partner here should tell him all about Sir Richard, 'cos he hadn't heard a word on it afore: as how should he? seeing that it on'y happened last night, and a matter of forty mile away from town. Well, sir, after he'd recovered his-self a bit—for he was struck quite stupid, as one may say—he says, says he, '*Mr. Grint, if ever I see Sir Richard Stamford in all my life, I saw him on'y a few minutes before I met you. He was in his cloak; and he turned into the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.*'—This was quite enough for Bill Sneesby and me; and it was fortunate we hadn't told our Aylesbury friend about the reward—or else he'd have wanted to go sheers ——"

"Here we are at the Edgeware Road!" suddenly cried Page: then, thrusting his head out of the window, he exclaimed to the driver, "Push along, my man—don't spare your horse-flesh! Do you see anything of the yellow coach yet?"

"Nothink, sir," was the reply.

Page still kept his head out of the window; and he strained his eyes to the utmost as he looked up the road. The night was moon-lit, the atmosphere was of silvery clearness, and all was bright with the sheen of the frost—so that he could distinguish objects at a considerable distance.

Suddenly the coachman uttered an ejaculation; and at the same instant the commercial traveller caught sight of a vehicle a quarter of a mile a-head.

"That's it, sir!" exclaimed the driver. "There—it's crossing over from one side of the road to the t'other — most likely on account of the flint-stones——"

"I see—I see!" interrupted Page, who at that moment got a glimpse of the yellow side and wheels of the coach. "Push along, my fine fellow! You'll earn your guinea yet!"

"And us the hundred ponnd reward, sir," added Mr. Grint, in a tone of satisfaction as lively as it was in his stolid nature to render it.

"Why—they're a stopping, sir!" ejaculated the driver. "I s'pose they're a-waiting for us to come up with 'em——"

"No such thing!" cried Page, who was hanging half-way out of the window, and straining his eyes to the full extent of their visual powers: "the villain has just jumped out of the coach——yes—'tis he, by heaven!"

"A tall man in a cloak, sir?" exclaimed the driver, without turning his head, but whipping his horses furiously.

"Yes—to be sure!" cried Page. "I saw him as plain as possible: he cut across the road——to those houses on the left, there——"

"And now the yaller jarvey is turning round to come back again," said Mr. Grint, who was gazing from the other window.

This last piece of information was perfectly true: and in a couple of minutes the two vehicles met The one containing the constables and Page pulled up—and the yellow coach followed the example. Out sprang the commercial traveller from the

former; and in breathless haste he assailed the driver of the latter with a host of questions.

"Which way is he gone?—where has he hidden himself?—what did he say?"

"Who d'ye mean?" demanded the coachman belonging to the yellow vehicle.

"Why—your fare, to be sure," answered Page: "the gentleman in the cloak!"

"Well—he didn't say much," was the response; "only when he happened to twig that you or some one with ye was hanging half-way out of that coach, he instantly called out to me to stop, tossed me a guinea, and cut off."

"But in which direction?" demanded the impatient commercial traveller.

"Ah! there you bother me," returned the man, evidently fencing with the question.

"You mean that he gave you a guinea not to answer any questions?" cried the astute Page. "Come—here are two; and now tell me the truth."

"Thank'ee kindly, sir," said the jarvey, leaning down from his box to receive the gold which Page handed up to him: then having clutched the reward, he added, "But it's precious little information I can give you, sir. All I know is that when the gentleman jumped out of the coach, he cut across the road and was out of sight in a minute. Whether he turned down the lane there—or whether he went into one of the little gardens in front of the houses close by, I really can't say. But it must have been one or t'other—for he disappeared in a jiffey."

"And that's all you can tell me for the two guineas!" exclaimed the irritated commercial traveller.

"Every bit, sir," responded the man; and whipping his horses as he thus spoke, the yellow vehicle rolled rapidly away.

"Perdition!" cried Page: "he has fairly swindled me! But never mind—I shall not give up the chase—so follow me, my men, as quick as you choose."

And, conceiving that it was not worth while to return into the vehicle in order to accomplish the little distance to the spot where the object of pursuit had descended from the yellow coach, the commercial traveller took to his heels—rushing along the road like a madman.

Grint and Sneesby, supposing that Page intended them to follow him likewise on foot, now leapt out of the vehicle: but the coachman, suddenly impressed with the idea that his fare were endeavouring to bilk him, bounded from the box, and laid a vigorous grasp upon the collars of the two constables.

An altercation now took place which occupied ten minutes; for Mr. Sneesby looked to his principal, Mr. Grint, to emancipate him from any liability in the case—and, on his side, Mr. Grint was fearful that if he once paid the money, he should not be able to recover it again from Mr. Page. At length the two constables determined upon re-entering the vehicle and driving after the commercial traveller; and this plan was accordingly adopted.

In the meantime Mr. Page, having reached that part of the road where he fancied that the object of pursuit must have sought concealment somewhere or other, began to knock at every door in the row of houses with the gardens in front; but to his reiterated question whether a tall gentleman in a cloak had just taken refuge there, he was met by a decisive negative. At length, having thus disturbed the inmates of half-a-dozen dwellings—for it was now nearly eleven o'clock—he was on the point of giving up the pursuit in despair, when suddenly he recollected the lane to which the driver of the yellow coach had alluded.

"Well, I won't be beaten yet awhile," he murmured to himself: and away he sped along the lane, not pausing to reflect whether the constables were following him, nor whether, if he *did* succeed in overtaking the fugitive, he could possibly secure him without their assistance.

On therefore rushed Mr. Page, as if he himself were pursued by the officers of justice; and heaven knows how long he would have thus exercised his speed, had he not suddenly been stopped by a huge fellow, whom he encountered at a turning in the lane. The moonlight fell upon as villanous a physiognomy as ever one would expect to meet outside of Newgate; and the commercial traveller was by no way reassured when a more attentive examination of the man made him acquainted with the fact that he carried a great club-stick in his hand.

The result was inevitable, and just what our readers might suppose. Mr. Page was compelled to surrender his purse, his watch, and his gold ring upon the spot; and the robber, not satisfied with this booty, insisted upon searching his victim's garments.

A mortal terror now came over the miserable commercial traveller: for all in an instant it flashed to his memory that he had about him his pocket-book containing bills of exchange and other documents of importance, which he had received during the last week of his tour, and which belonged to his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley of Wood Street.

"Come, now," exclaimed the ruffian, as Mr. Page exhibited an inclination to offer resistance to the attempt at personal search,—"none of your gammon with me; or I'll dash your brains out!"

And seizing the collar of the writhing victim with one hand, he brandished the club in a menacing manner with the other: so that Mr. Page was forced to surrender at discretion. The pocket-book was accordingly discovered by the thief in the course of a few moments; and when he had hastily glanced on its contents by the moonlight, he said in an abrupt tone of interrogation, "Bills of exchange—eh?"

"Y-e-s," replied the miserable Page, who was shivering from head to foot, alike through cold and terror.

"Well—they're of more use to you than they are to me," continued the robber; "and so you may have the book back again for fifty guineas."

"Fifty guineas!" repeated the unhappy commercial traveller. "I haven't got a farthing left about me. You have taken my purse, which contains ten or a dozen guineas——"

"A miserable trifle!" exclaimed the robber. "Is it worth your while to give fifty guineas to have the pocket-book back, with all its contents just as they are?"

"Worth my while!" cried Page, a gleam of hope breaking in upon him even through the black cloud of his present misfortune: "to be sure it is! I should be ruined—utterly ruined—if I didn't recover it."

"Well, then," said the man, "I'll tell you how we can manage the affair. To-morrow night at nine o'clock precisely, you must be walking about at the beginning of Tooley Street—just over London Bridge

you know;—and there you'll meet a young woman dressed in black. She wont speak to you first: but you must go up to her and ask whether she's waiting for any body. She'll reply that she has found something and is looking for the owner. Then you may tell her that you're the person she's expecting; and when you put fifty guineas into her hand—mind, fifty go'den shiners, and no flimsies—she'll give you up your pocket-book.

"Can't it be done before to-morrow night?" demanded Page, who was most anxious to call upon his employers in the morning.

"No:—you must bide *my* time," was the rough and decisive answer. "And now let me give you a little bit of advice—which is, not to try any plant upon the young woman, or get constables to lurk about for the purpose of grabbing her: because she'll have friends watching at no great distance—and as certain as she is to be rescued, so sure are you to have a bullet through your head. Do you understand me?"

"It would be difficult to mistake your meaning," responded Page.

"So much the better," observed the robber. "And now I shall say 'good night.' But I may as well give you a little bit of information, though, before we part," he added, as an idea struck him. "The fact is, my dear sir," he continued, assuming a familiar tone, "I'm a very useful man in my way, and not particular to a point or two. I'm pretty well-known to a good many swellish coves at the West End—although they don't recognise me if we happen to meet in Bond Street. Our intimacy is all private, and only lasts while I've any business in hand for them. But what I was going to observe is, that if you ever get into any trouble and want a clever chap to get you out of it—or if you may happen to require anything of a delicate nature to be done neat and clean—you may apply to me. There's a flash crib in Horslydown, known as the *Beggar's Staff;* and a message left at the bar for Joe the Magsman will in due course be delivered to *me*. So now good night!"

Having thus delivered himself, the huge ruffian turned and proceeded at a rapid rate down the lane—flourishing his club in a manner indicating as significantly as possible that it would be dangerous to follow him.

But Mr. Page had not the least idea of making the attempt. Indeed, he was so astounded by the strange tirade with which the thief closed the interview that he could not reply, even if he had wished, to the parting salutation.

At length, recalling his scattered ideas, he began to deplore most bitterly the wild-goose chase which he had that night undertaken and which had brought him into his present unenviable predicament; and then he bethought himself of the two constables whom he had left in the hackney-coach.

"The lazy scoundrels!" he ejaculated aloud: "if they had only followed me as I enjoined them, this misfortune could not have occurred. On the contrary, we might have captured the thief who has plundered me. By heaven, 'tis provoking—very provoking! Purse, watch, ring—all gone; and fifty guineas to pay to-morrow night for the pocket-book!"

While thus giving way to his vexation, Mr. Page rapidly retraced his steps; and in a short time he reached the main road, where he vainly looked about for the hackney-coach. The driver had become tired of waiting; and the constables were accordingly compelled to undertake the settlement of the fare—in pursuance of which agreement, the vehicle carried them back to Holborn.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the commercial traveller,—exhausted with fatigue, half dead with cold, and bitterly repenting of his folly in meddling with matters that did not immediately concern him,—reached the George and Blue Boar, where he lost no time in seeking the repose of which he stood so much in need.

But even this he was not permitted to enjoy so long as he could have wished: for scarcely had the thousand churches of the mighty metropolis proclaimed the hour of seven, when he was aroused by a violent shaking through the medium of a rough hand applied to the shoulder;—and, starting up, he beheld, by the dim light of the cold wintry morning, the forms of Grint and Sneesby by his bed-side.

These worthies came to dun him for the hackney-coach fare which they had been forced to make up between them;—and the wretched man was compelled to borrow the money of the landlord to satisfy their rapacity.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEAUTIFUL SISTERS.

We must now return to the gentleman in the cloak, who was the object of the wild-goose chase which terminated in so deplorable a manner for Mr. Page.

The reader will remember that there was a row of houses with gardens in front of them, at that part of the Edgeware Road where the fugitive had suddenly and unaccountably disappeared. These dwellings were small, but neat externally and comfortable within; and they were dignified with the name of "Villas." The speculator who had built them, inherited from his father the not very euphonious name of Gubbins; and, though his ambition prompted him to bestow immortality on the appellation by calling the range of houses "Gubbins' Terrace," his friends had wisely interfered to rescue the "sweet little cottages" from such an ugly nomenclature. The result was that the title of "Paradise Villas" was fixed upon as a more pleasing substitute, and was conferred accordingly.

The villa that stood last in the row and at the angle of the lane in which Mr. Page was eased of his property, was occupied by a widower and his two daughters. Mr. Clarendon was a gentleman of small—very small income, allowed by a wealthy and titled relative. He had been unfortunate—some said improvident—in early life, and had married the beautiful but penniless daughter of a poor clergyman. This match gave great umbrage to the proud and aristocratic family to which he himself belonged; and when his own means were exhausted, all that he could obtain from the bounty of his cousin, Lord Marchmont, was an allowance of a hundred and fifty pounds a-year, just to keep him from actual penury.

Mrs. Clarendon was a woman of fine feeling, generous sympathies, and keen sensibility: and her husband's misfortunes preyed deeply upon her mind. She secretly reproached herself with being the cause of the disgrace into which he had fallen in respect

to his family; and, taking the matter to heart, literally pined away until she sank into the tomb. Mr. Clarendon now found himself left, at the age of five-and-thirty, with two young children totally dependent upon his care; and he resolved to perform his duty towards his motherless daughters. His family still persisted in disowning him; and he accordingly retired into some remote and cheap district, where he reared and educated the girls to the best of his means. They grew up in all the glory of maiden loveliness: but being deprived of the more delicate supervision of a mother, and having scarcely any female society in the seclusion which their father's slender resources compelled him to adopt, their minds were not imbued with those strictly feminine principles which the maternal parent can alone inculcate, foster, and permanently establish. Their virtue wanted the stamina necessary to maintain it when it should have to pass through the world's ordeal: it was rather of a negative quality than otherwise—existing because it had as yet undergone no temptation. Their religion was confined to a mere knowledge of the sacred writings, read and remembered like any other book, and believed in because they had been taught to hold that faith:—but the deep conviction—the holy reliance—and the profound feeling, which constitute true religion, were deficient. They went to church with regularity, as many other giddy and thoughtless young ladies go: but they never had had any one to impress upon them the necessity of laying aside all worldly thoughts, and throwing the whole soul into the divine worship. Good-natured, affectionate, and light-hearted girls were Octavia and Pauline Clarendon: artless, frank, and innocent likewise were they, because totally ignorant of the world's ways, and inexperienced in its snares, its perfidies, and its deceits.

When their education was completed, Mr. Clarendon, who had long been wearied of the dull seclusion in which he thus passed so many years, removed with his two daughters to London: and in

one of the Paradise Villas had they been located about eighteen months at the time when our tale opens.

But Mr. Clarendon was not now at home. Years had elapsed since he had made any effort to be reconciled to his proud relations; and, at last—finding that his income was disproportionately small when compared with the claims that there were upon his means, especially with an augmenting taxation and the increasing dearness of provisions—he had resolved to repair to Marchmont Castle in Derbyshire, and endeavour to seek an interview with his noble cousin, its owner. Considering that his daughters had reached that age when they could take care of themselves during his temporary absence, Mr. Clarendon set out accordingly; and only two days had elapsed since his departure, when the incidents which occupied our two first chapters took place.

Before, however, we resume the thread of our narrative, we must pause for a few moments to describe Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

They were both tall, elegantly shaped, and possessing a maturity of charms which made them seem two or three years older than they really were: for at this time, Octavia was twenty-one, and Pauline a month or two past nineteen. Their style of loveliness was pretty nearly the same,—except that Octavia's hair was a rich auburn, and her sister's a dark brown: but their complexions were equally fair and beautiful—without spot or blemish, and reminding the beholder of the most delicate blending of the hues of the rose with the purity of the lily. Their foreheads were high and open,—their mouths small, and with lips red and ripe as cherries—and their teeth of pearly whiteness. Their eyes were of deep blue—large and rolling, and at times expressing an involuntary tenderness that gave a voluptuous langour to the countenances of these charming sisters.

Octavia and Pauline were tall in stature, as we have already observed: but we might have stated that they were above the usual height of women. Indeed, they were fine-grown girls—and not merely beautiful but handsome. Whom to prefer of the two, on the score of loveliness, it would have been difficult to decide: for if there were something more subdued and retiring in the blushing charms of Pauline,—yet it was impossible to gaze without the tenderest emotions on the more imposing and queenly beauty of Octavia,—especially when the light, playing upon the rich redundancy of her auburn hair, seemed to crown its glossy surface as with a glory!

And Octavia knew that she was beautiful: her gait—her demeanour—her carriage, all denoted a consciousness that she was the object of admiration. Nor less was Pauline gifted with the same vanity;—but it displayed itself less—or rather, was more subdued by the bashfulness attendant on a tenderer age.

The sisters were much attached to each other, and loved their father with the sincerest affection. Though a disappointed—crushed—and dispirited man, he had behaved kindly towards them; and they fully comprehended all the sacrifices he had made to rear them genteelly. They accordingly repaid him with the most solicitous attention to all his wants and wishes; and we must mention, as a good trait in their character, that they never sought to gratify their vanity by extravagance in dress. They moreover devoted so much care to the domestic affairs, and managed with so much economy, that no regular servant was kept: the occasional attendance of a char-woman was all that was needed to assist them in maintaining the little dwelling in the best possible order.

We have enabled our readers to form a tolerably correct idea of the two young ladies who are destined to play no inconsiderable part in our narrative, of which we now resume the continuous thread.

It was verging towards eleven o'clock on the evening of Mr. Page's adventures, when a tradesman from the neighbourhood knocked at the door of the cottage inhabited by the Clarendon family; and Octavia answered the summons. The man left some article which had been ordered, and, having apologised for calling so late, took his departure. The young lady then tripped lightly down the gravel-walk of the little garden in order to lock the front gate; and at that instant a gentleman in a cloak, who had just alighted from a hackney-coach precisely opposite, hurried up to Miss Clarendon, saying, "Permit me to step in and rest myself for a few minutes."

Had she paused for a single instant to reflect upon this request, she would have at once seen that it was of so extraordinary a nature, coming as it did from a perfect stranger and at such a time of night, that nothing but a prompt refusal could consistently and properly meet it:—but its very strangeness, and the abruptness with which it was made, so completely confused—or rather bewildered the young lady, that she held the gate open with her fair hand,—and the gentleman, taking this as a proof of assent, hurried into the house.

Scarcely, however, had he thus glided past Octavia, when she was struck with the impropriety of which she had been guilty, and hastened after him. On entering the villa she mechanically closed the front door behind her; and as all this was the work of a few moments, the driver of the yellow coach did not in reality perceive which way the gentleman had so suddenly disappeared.

Pauline was seated in the little front parlour, which was very neatly furnished, and lighted with a lamp; and the supper, consisting of a cold joint, was upon the table. The young lady was both astonished and alarmed when she heard the heavy steps of a man rush into the house; and she started from her chair, with an ejaculation of terror.

The stranger entered the parlour and seemed immediately struck with the exquisite beauty of Pauline Clarendon; and he had scarcely given utterance to a few words of apology for his abrupt intrusion, when Octavia made her appearance.

If the gentleman in the cloak had been seized with admiration of the younger sister, he was now positively amazed at the queen-like loveliness of the elder: but almost instantly perceiving the awkward position in which he stood with regard to these young ladies, and the embarrassment which they experienced at this adventure, he hastened to give some explanation which might relieve them from so unpleasant a feeling.

"I am well aware, charming ladies," he said, in a smooth and courteous tone and with a fascination of manner which almost immediately disarmed them of any resentment which his intrusion had excited,—"I am well aware that my conduct must appear most rude—most ungentlemanly—most unjustifiable in

your eyes: but I trust that you will give me leave to rest myself for a few minutes—and in the meantime I shall be enabled, I hope, to satisfy you that I am incapable of offering you a wanton insult."

While he was uttering the last words of his speech, Octavia exchanged with her sister a hasty glance which showed that the same thought had simultaneously struck them both: namely, that it would be impossible to refuse the slight hospitality which was solicited.

The elder Miss Clarendon accordingly sate down—an example which Pauline immediately followed; and the gentleman, understanding the tacit assent thus conveyed, threw off his cloak and took a chair. The brief pause afforded by these little arrangements gave him an opportunity of thinking of some excuse that might account for his extraordinary intrusion and enlist the sympathies of the young ladies at the same time: for he was suddenly seized with the desire to cultivate the acquaintance of the two most charming creatures he had ever encountered in the course of his life.

On their side, they could not help observing that their strange visitor was not only of very handsome appearance, but likewise of polished manners; and that there was about him an air of refinement far superior to anything they had before met with in their short experience of the world. In fact, the sisters were both prepossessed in his favour; and when he resumed the conversation, they were fully prepared—though involuntarily—to accept any reasonable excuse which he might offer for his conduct.

"Feeling that the most ample explanation is due to you, ladies," he said, "I must begin by stating that I am a gentleman of some property, and that my name is Harley. It may be that I was foolishly good-natured—it may also be that I was deceived by a villain: but certain it is that I gave my security to a large amount on behalf of a person who called himself my friend—and this individual has absconded. Young ladies of your age, and dwelling in a genteel seclusion—if I may be allowed to form an opinion of your habits from the favourable impression you have made upon me—are not likely to be well acquainted with the proceedings of that dreadful pestilence called *law:* but you may probably have heard or read enough to understand that a person in my position becomes liable to have his freedom most disgracefully molested by certain human sharks known as *bailiffs*. Such is my present state; and it was in flying from those malignant enemies that I was audacious enough to seek refuge in the first house whose friendly door stood open."

This statement was delivered in a tone of semi-jocularity which put the young ladies into a very good humour with Mr. Harley; and another interchange of glances convinced each sister that they were both animated with the same inclination to render all possible service to a gentleman who had suffered so cruelly in aiding a friend. Octavia accordingly expressed the pleasure which they felt in being able to afford him a refuge; and concluded a few brief and modestly delivered observations by offering him some refreshment—at the same time apologising for the frugal nature of their fare.

Mr. Harley, who as a man of the world saw that the acceptance of the proposal would naturally place him upon a more friendly footing with the sisters, responded in the affirmative; and now, while Octavia hastened to arrange a knife and fork and clean plate for the guest, Pauline tripped lightly down into the kitchen, returning presently with a jug of foaming table-ale which she placed on the board. Mr. Harley apologised for giving so much trouble; whereupon Octavia informed him, with a modest dignity truly captivating, that they were accustomed to wait upon themselves, as their circumstances did not permit them to keep a servant—and they could therefore well attend upon their guests. This avowal was turned to advantage by Mr. Harley, who paid the sisters a flattering but delicate compliment upon the praiseworthy qualities which were thus revealed to him; and he dexterously suffered them to understand that he himself was a stranger to the happiness of a sweet domesticity, being as yet unmarried.

As the conversation progressed, he learnt that the sisters were alone together in the house, and that their father had gone into Derbyshire. They also, in the artlessness of their character, made him acquainted with the reasons of this visit and the hopes that were entertained of their parent being able to effect a reconciliation with his noble relative Mr. Harley expressed an earnest desire that the journey might be crowned with success; and in all he said there was an apparent sincerity which still farther increased the favourable opinion already formed of him by his beautiful hostesses.

Indeed, an hour had passed away so pleasantly that the young ladies had not once thought of the lapse of time, until the clock in the passage proclaimed midnight; and then, suddenly made aware how late it was, they glanced somewhat uneasily at each other. Mr. Harley rose immediately from his seat, and resuming his cloak, was about to express his gratitude for the hospitality he had received, when a sudden crash in the road, just opposite the house, and which was instantaneously followed by the plunging of horses, the screams of ladies, and the ejaculations of post-boys, startled the inmates of the comfortable little parlour.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCOUCHEMENT.

THE sounds which thus appeared to promise a new adventure, were occasioned by the sudden breaking of the fore-axle of a travelling barouche, which was whirling along the road as speedily as four spanking horses and two expert postilions could hurry it.

Mr. Harley instantly rushed forth to offer his assistance to the ladies whose screams had emanated from the vehicle; while Octavia and Pauline followed as far as the garden-gate to render their aid if necessary.

The scene in the road was one of the utmost confusion and terror:—for the postilions were occupied in endeavouring to quiet their horses, which were plunging frightfully;—a valet in plain clothes had been thrown from the box, and pitching on his head, lay stunned within a few feet of the broken vehicle;—a lady's-maid, who was seated on the same dangerous eminence, was clinging to the rails which she had clutched just in time to save herself from a similar accident;—and two ladies inside were shrieking for help.

Mr. Harley's first impulse was to drag the valet

away from the dangerous vicinity of the horses' hoofs; and a rapid glance by the aid of the pure moonlight enabled him to perceive that the man was not killed, and was indeed already regaining his senses. Mr. Harley then assisted the lady's-maid, who was half dead with terror, to descend from her critical position on the box;—and, having thus ensured her safety, he opened the door of the barouche to afford egress to the two ladies.

All this had been the work of less than half a minute; but scarcely had Mr. Harley obtained a glimpse of the countenance of the lady who was farthest from the side of the vehicle where he stood, when he uttered an ejaculation of amazement, and, darting away behind the barouche, disappeared in a few moments.

The ladies themselves were too much terrified to notice his features when he had approached the door to open it; and now, hastily precipitating themselves from the interior, they were received in the arms of Octavia and Pauline. For the sisters, perceiving the sudden flight of Mr. Harley, sprang forward to succour those whom he had thus unaccountably abandoned.

One of the ladies was apparently about eighteen or nineteen; the other was upwards of ten years older;—and it was the *former* whose countenance had produced so strange an effect upon Mr. Harley.

The sisters instantaneously conducted these two ladies into their parlour; and the younger one, sinking upon a chair, moaned and writhed as if in great pain. The elder lady appeared to be seized with a sudden consternation at beholding these symptoms on the part of her companion: but almost immediately recovering her presence of mind, she turned towards the sisters, exclaiming in a tone of hurried though fervent appeal, "For the love of God, young ladies, assist my suffering friend to a bed-room—she is about to become a mother!"

This intelligence, startling though it were, was sufficient to excite all the generous sympathies that dwelt in the bosoms of the sisters: and they hastened to comply with the urgent request, while the elder lady rushed back into the road to give certain instructions to the postilions and the servants.

By this time the valet had recovered his senses and was slowly approaching the house, leaning on the arm of the lady's-maid, who, as we have already intimated, was more frightened than hurt.

The elder lady's orders were rapidly and imperiously given.

"Matilda," she said, addressing herself to the female, "hasten to rejoin your mistress, *who is seriously indisposed:*" and as she uttered these words, she darted upon the abigail a glance of deep meaning, which the clear moonlight prevented from being either lost upon her or misunderstood. Matilda accordingly hurried into the house.

"Pembroke," said the lady, now speaking with equal rapidity to the valet, "you must get those postilions away and all traces of the accident removed as speedily as possible. Reward the men liberally—and see that the occurrence is kept as quiet as it may be. Having done this, you must take a lodging for yourself in the neighbourhood; and let me know your address—by *letter*, mind—in the course of to-morrow, so that I may be enabled to convey farther instructions to you. You can direct to me in the name of—let me see?—oh! Mrs. Smith; and a glance will inform you presently the number of this house and the name of the Place or Terrace, or Row, where it is situated."

The valet received these instructions with a low bow; and the lady whom we shall now denominate *Mrs. Smith*—that being the nomenclature which had first suggested itself to her mind—hurried back into the villa.

Ascending to the bed-room whither her younger companion had been borne, she exclaimed, upon entering the chamber, "How does my dear *Mrs. Mordaunt* feel now?"

These words were uttered with a rapid and expressive glance at the lady's-maid, as much as to convey an intimation of the name by which the invalid was to pass; and the sisters were too much bewildered by this new adventure that had occurred, to notice anything extraordinary in the way in which the question was put.

The invalid herself—whom we must call Mrs. Mordaunt—was in the incipient agonies of a premature childbirth, and too wretched in mind as well as too much anguished in body to notice anything that was passing around her. Mrs. Smith now implored Octavia to procure the immediate attendance of a medical man; and the young lady, throwing on her bonnet and shawl, hastened to comply with the request. Pauline quitted the chamber at the same time, and repaired to the parlour, where she awaited the return of her sister, who shortly re-appeared, followed by a surgeon from the neighbourhood.

The medical gentleman thus summoned, was about forty years of age, and tolerably handsome. His features were large and regular; but his countenance could not altogether be styled pleasing, inasmuch as there was a sinister expression in the eyes which, though scarcely definite enough to strike a superficial observer, would not have escaped any one of keener perception. It happened that he had only just returned home from the house of a patient when Miss Clarendon called; and he was accordingly dressed in his usual manner, which was with considerable neatness and precision, when he accompanied her to the villa. He was a person of few words, and never asked questions through motives of curiosity: so long as he was well paid, he saw things only with a professional eye;—but he was avaricious, selfish, and of a money-making disposition. He was married to a lady who shared in his miserly propensities; and as they had no children and his practice was extensive, they had contrived to amass a handsome independence.

Mr. Thurston—for this was the name of the medical gentleman—was introduced into the bed-chamber where his services were required; and Octavia, having seen him as far as the door of that room, returned to her sister in the parlour.

"This is a night of adventures, Pauline," she observed, as she seated herself near the cheerful fire and warmed her hands which were chilled with the nipping frost.

"But the present incident is more extraordinary and also more unpleasant, than the former," returned the younger Miss Clarendon. "By the bye, did you notice how abruptly Mr. Harley took his departure?"

"I consider his behaviour to be most rude—most ungentlemanlike," said Octavia, with a strong emphasis on the epithets. "After the hospitality we afforded him—and under such equivocal cir-

cumstances, too—the least he could have done would——"

"Would have been to wish us good bye," observed Pauline, finishing the sentence for her sister;—and the two handsome girls pouted their pretty lips,—lips on which an Anthony might have sealed the loss of the empire of a world!

"But do not let us think of Mr. Harley any longer," suddenly exclaimed Octavia, proposing however something to which she could not possibly settle her mind, inasmuch as the handsome person, the elegant manners, and the varied conversational powers of that gentleman had made a deep impression upon her.

"No—we will banish him from our memories," observed Pauline. "Indeed, we ought to think of the poor lady up-stairs, whom the accident to the barouche will perhaps render prematurely a mother."

"And she is of course totally unprepared for such an event," said Octavia. "I will steal gently up to the room—knock at the door—and inquire if we can possibly be of any service ——"

"Do so, dear sister," interrupted Pauline: "for I can assure you that Mrs. Mordaunt's beautiful countenance, though convulsed as it was with suffering, completely prepossessed me in her favour These ladies are evidently rich:—did you observe what magnificent furs they wore—and what costly jewellery they had about their persons?"

"Yes—they are both handsomely dressed, and very superior in their manners," said Octavia. "They moreover travelled in good style—a barouche and four, with a valet and a lady's-maid: and yet they could not be going to a great distance—for they do not appear to have had any boxes or portmanteaus with them."

"The same circumstance struck me just now," remarked Pauline. "In my opinion they are people of rank travelling *incognito*. Such things are done, you know, dear sister. At all events, the barouche was a plain one—without any arms upon the panels ——"

"And the valet was not in livery," added Octavia. "But while we are wasting time by chatting in this manner, as if nothing unusual were going on in the house, the poor lady may require our services in some way or other."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when the door opened and Mrs. Smith made her appearance.

"My dear young ladies," she said, "I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness towards my bosom-friend Mrs. Mordaunt. I feel deeply all the generosity of your conduct; and—pardon me for making such an observation—but rest assured that it shall not go unrewarded."

"Oh! madam," ejaculated Octavia, the blood rushing to her cheeks: "though we are poor, we are not mercenary ——"

"I know it, my sweet girl," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a kind and conciliatory tone: "nevertheless there are means of proving one's gratitude in a substantial manner, and yet so delicately as to give no offence. However—we will not say any more upon that subject at present: for I have yet another favour to solicit ——"

"Speak, madam—speak," cried Octavia: "anything that we can do to serve yourself or your friend shall be done cheerfully."

"My request is that you will show our female attendant Matilda the way to the surgeon's house," answered the lady. "Mr. Thurston himself—for such I understand to be his name—is unable to quit his patient up-stairs, and he has written a short note which must be immediately forwarded to his wife, in order to procure certain little articles absolutely necessary under present circumstances. But as Matilda is quite ignorant of this neighbourhood—and as we cannot think of suffering you to go out any more *alone* at so late an hour ——"

"I am ready, madam," exclaimed the good-natured Octavia, hastily resuming her bonnet and thick shawl, which she had laid aside in the parlour on her return from the previous visit to the surgeon's.

The lady's-maid was thereupon summoned; and Octavia, once again daring the piercing chill of the night, conducted the dependant to Mr. Thurston's residence. Mrs. Thurston was in bed; but a servant speedily answered the door, and admitting Miss Clarendon and Matilda into a parlour, took the note up-stairs to her mistress.

We should here observe that the surgeon and his wife were in the habit of receiving at their house ladies who were in a way to become mothers, and who had special reasons for retiring into a strict seclusion during the period of their confinement. A good supply of baby-linen was therefore constantly kept ready by the thrifty and money-making Mrs. Thurston; and it was for articles of this kind that Matilda had been sent with the note. The surgeon's wife, presuming from the nature of her husband's note that he had in hand a case that was likely to prove lucrative, manifested no displeasure at being summoned from her warm couch, but rose immediately and packed up a quantity of baby-linen in the course of a very few minutes. The servant delivered the parcel to Matilda, who, thus provided, returned with Octavia to the villa.

The lady's-maid was a shrewd, cautious, and reserved young woman, of about five-and-twenty. She was tolerably good-looking, well educated, and of superior manners for her position: in fact, she was the daughter of a poor curate in some remote district, and who having a large family to support upon ninety pounds a-year, while his rector had five thousand, was compelled to allow his eldest children to accept menial places in wealthy families.

During the walk to and from the surgeon's house, but a very few words were exchanged between Miss Clarendon and Matilda; and those were confined to observations of no particular interest.

We must now introduce the reader to the chamber where Mrs. Mordaunt was lying in the pangs of maternity, with the surgeon on one side of the bed and Mrs. Smith on the other.

The young lady who was thus about to become mother, was, as we have already stated, about eighteen or nineteen years of age. She was tall and well formed,—with a full and rounded bust, voluptuously developed,—a remarkably clear and beautiful complexion,—large blue eyes, with dark fringes and brows delicately pencilled,—lips that were the least thing coarse, but between which gleamed rows of pearl,—and a nose and chin that were exquisitely chiselled in the purest classic style. Her luxuriant light brown hair now flowed in rich, curled, and wavy masses all over the pillow, and wantoned upon the bosom that was palpitating with the throes of both bodily and mental agony.

Mrs. Smith was likewise a handsome woman, of a style of beauty contrasting altogether with that which we have just described: for her hair and eyes were black,—her complexion was of that clear olive, c

rather bistre, which shows in its pure transparency the carnation hue of the warm blood,—and her shape was slender, but admirably proportioned.

The surgeon had not been many moments in the chamber, ere his quick eye perceived that Mrs. Smith wore a wedding-ring; whereas the lady who was called Mrs. Mordaunt and who was about to become a mother, had upon her finger no such evidence of the marriage state. Mr. Thurston did not however appear to notice this fact: he saw, by the well-filled purse which peeped half-way out of a reticule that had been tossed on a chair, and by the handsome jewellery belonging to the ladies, that his bill was safe,—and that was sufficient.

After an absence of about twenty minutes, Matilda returned with the baby-linen; and her arrival at this instant was most opportune—for shortly afterwards Mrs. Mordaunt became the mother of a male child.

CHAPTER V.

MORNING IN LONDON.—THE DISOWNED BABE.

Cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, like a grey mist that struggles with slow and partial success against night's darker veil.

The frost had broken up suddenly, and was succeeded by a dampness of the atmosphere that hung like a thick and noxious vapour over the mighty metropolis.

The water-cress girl, shivering in her scant clothing and with her naked feet and ankles of a livid red as if they were raw, could scarcely give forth the usual cry that proclaimed her presence, so spasmodically did her teeth chatter; and as the poor wretch dragged her weary form along, gazing anxiously at the house-doors to see whether the servants were coming out to buy, each bleeding foot left its sanguine trace on the pavement. Alas! unhappy creature—she had risen at five, and for three long hours that morning had she groped in the utter darkness and amidst the ponds and rivulets in the northern outskirts, for a few pennyworths of green sprigs that were to give a relish to breakfasts eaten in warm rooms and by cheerful fires! But not a morsel of bread had as yet passed *her* lips—and her hands and her feet were so numbed that they had lost all sense of feeling as she trod the damp pavement or doled forth her cresses.

Soon after this poor girl had passed along her usual beat, came the milk-maid with cheeks as red as if she were a forest-hoyden, and with her buxom charms denoting by their round, plump, and swelling contours, the enjoyment of a vigorous health. She was warmly clad with a thick shawl over her shoulders, and good stockings, and lace-up leathern boots; and though she felt the cold, yet 'twas not with that shivering wretchedness and shuddering sensation of misery which convulsed the frame of the other. There was moreover a certain cheerful assurance in her strange and fantastic cry; and at each house where she stopped, she had a pleasant remark to make and a kind greeting to receive.

Ten minutes afterwards, the baker came shuffling along, with his basket slung to his back and containing the hot rolls enveloped in a blanket; while at the same time the bell of the muffin-boy thrilled through the damp and heavy air.

At this hour, too, might be seen the servant-maids sweeping out the dust at the front doors or scouring the steps,—then pausing to nod to some acquaintance in the shape of a tradesman's assistant, passing by,—or perhaps tripping down to the iron railings before the houses, just to exchange a few words of friendly gossip with each other.

Behold, likewise, the old char-women bustling along to the places where they work,—drawing their thin, scanty shawls as closely around their shivering forms as possible—gazing wistfully at the public-house as they pass it, and thinking how agreeable a dram would prove on such a miserable morning—and conning over the last bit of scandal which they have gleaned, in order to retail it anon with all the amplifications their ingenuity can devise.

Perhaps, too, at this hour, may be met two or three of the daughters of crime,—miserable specimens of the frail sisterhood, returning home to their wretched abodes after having passed the night in some house of infamy—with their finery all huddled on in a manner indicating that the care which presided over the toilette ere they sallied forth on the previous evening, has not been observed in the hurried make-shift of the morning,—lost, degraded, health-shattered creatures, with the natural pallor or sallowness of their features fearfully visible even beneath the warm artificial complexion which rouge has given to them!

Yes—and at that period of general rising and breakfasting throughout all save the strictly fashionable quarters of the metropolis, the half-naked, shivering, squalid mendicant may be seen crawling, or perhaps shuffling along,—with his shirtless breast all exposed to the bitter air—his hair damp, as if he had slept in a field or wandered all night about the streets—his shoulders thrown forward, and his lank arms drawn in tight against his sides, while one hand is clasped over the back of the other in the spasmodic convulsion of a chill that searches him through and through to the very marrow of his bones!

Nor less, at this same hour, soon after the dawn of the miserable winter's morning, is seen the starveling beggar-boy,—a lad of tender years, whose growth is stunted by misery, and whose frame is emaciated so that the ribs in his poor little sides may be counted,—the friendless, parentless, and unprotected child, who seems to be the outcast of society—a filthy globule of the moral scum thrown up by the fermenting passions, interests, and selfishness of the great world of London,—a miserable being whose existence is passed in the very gutter, or on the dunghill, or under hedges, and who is not even so enviable as those whose lot alternates between a flash-house and a prison,—a poor doomed boy to whose ear it were a hideous mockery to breathe a word of religion, or of morality, or of the hopes and fears attendant on the Christian faith!

Yes: cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, as the beautiful sisters, Octavia and Pauline Clarendon, began to make preparations for breakfast. They had scarcely closed their eyes all night: but their cheeks glowed with the hues of health, and their spirits were gay and cheerful as they performed those domestic duties which they chose not to entrust to the char-woman, who had already arrived.

As Mrs. Mordaunt progressed well after her accouchement, Mr. Thurston had returned home at about two o'clock in the morning; and during his absence an earnest and most serious consultation had been held by the young mother and her friend Mrs. Smith, relative to the disposal of the babe. At length they resolved that certain proposals should be made to the surgeon; and accordingly, when he reappeared shortly after eight o'clock, Mrs. Smith sought an opportunity of speaking with him alone in a room adjoining the chamber of the invalid.

"Mr. Thurston," she said, "I wish to submit to your consideration a matter of vital importance—and yet I know not how to open the subject."

"Perhaps, madam," returned the medical man, "it will save you some embarrassment if I assure you that I have already formed a conjecture relative to the aim which you have in view."

"Indeed, sir!" ejaculated the lady, amazed at his keenness of perception. "You can guess, then, that——"

"That it is respecting the child," he added, fixing his dark eyes significantly upon her. "Be not afraid madam, to explain your views: I am a man of honour!"

"Then I can no longer hesitate to address you upon this delicate—*most* delicate subject," resumed Mrs. Smith, encouraged by the surgeon's words. "You doubtless observed that there was no wedding-ring upon the hand of my unhappy friend—and I need scarcely tell you that she has become a mother without being a wife! Oh! sir—the honour of an illustrious family is menaced — terribly menaced——"

"There are ways and means of covering female frailty with an impenetrable veil," interrupted the surgeon, in an emphatic tone.

"Ah! now I am still farther encouraged to proceed," exclaimed the lady: then, after a short pause she said, "Will you take charge of that hapless babe, Mr. Thurston?—your recompense shall far exceed your most sanguine expectations."

"I will, madam," was the answer, instantaneously and unhesitatingly given. "But as this must be regarded as a mere matter of business—a negotiation to be conducted with the utmost circumspection and prudence—pardon me if I inquire what guarantee you can offer me for the fulfilment of any conditions that may be settled between us?"

"Listen attentively, sir," replied Mrs. Smith; "and ponder well upon all I am about to say. Upon receiving into your house that hapless child whom a mother's frailty compels her to disown, you must consider that it henceforth belongs to you. Adopt it as your own son if you please—or bestow upon it any name you may think fit,—and devise any tale which may appear to you most suitable to account to your friends for the fact of its being thrown upon your hands,—arrange all these details in your own way,—but pledge yourself solemnly and sacredly never to take any steps to discover its parents. On these conditions the sum of ten thousand pounds——"

"Ten thousand pounds!" ejaculated Thurston, startled from his habitual equanimity and self-possession by the mention of such a princely amount, and half-fearful lest his ears should have deceived him.

"Yes — ten thousand pounds," repeated Mrs. Smith. "Will that sum suffice?"

"I accept the proposal, with all the conditions you may annex to it," said Mr. Thurston, recovering his outward composure, although his heart was elate with an indescribable joy.

"You will undertake, then, to preserve an inviolable secrecy regarding what little you already know or what more you may suspect in reference to the mother of that child," resumed Mrs. Smith: "I mean that should you meet her hereafter, you will not attempt to recognise her, wherever that encounter may take place and under whatever circumstances."

"I assent to all this," said the surgeon; "and I swear most solemnly to observe the compact."

"The same condition which I last stipulated, applies to myself," continued Mrs. Smith. "Wherever and whenever you may happen to meet me, we must be strangers—total strangers to each other."

"All shall be as you propose, madam," returned Mr. Thurston. "Have you any farther instructions?"

"None," replied the lady. "This evening the money shall be paid to you—and at any risk to herself I must remove my unhappy friend to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed the surgeon. "Consider, madam—the weather is inclement—it is in the depth of winter——"

"But the case is urgent, sir," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a tone which cut short all farther remonstrance on the part of the medical man.

Thus terminated the colloquy; and when they retraced their way to the bed-chamber, Mrs. Mordaunt instantaneously perceived by her friend's countenance that she had effected an arrangement with the surgeon.

After breakfast Mrs. Smith obtained writing-materials from the sisters and immediately penned the following letter:—

"———was prematurely delivered of a male child last night. The infant lives, and is pronounced by the medical man to be healthy. Arrangements have been made in a satisfactory way relative to the disposal of the babe. Circumstances, which I cannot possibly pause to detail, favoured the secrecy of all that has occurred; and ——— is as well and in as good spirits as can be expected. I will write again in a day or two. We shall remove to-morrow to my seat in Herts.

"E. D."

This letter was addressed to *General Barth, Post-office, Weymouth;* and, having carefully folded and sealed it, Mrs. Smith took it herself to a receiving-house in Oxford Street. Thence she proceeded in a hackney-coach to a banker's at the West End; and having there obtained a large sum of money, she visited a jeweller's shop at which she purchased two handsome lady's watches and several other articles for the embellishment of the female toilette, the total cost amounting to about a hundred guineas.

Mrs. Smith then returned to Paradise Villas, and presented the jewellery to Octavia and Pauline. The young ladies, though much delighted with the gifts, which were at once tasteful, elegant, and handsome, at first objected to receive them on the ground that it appeared as if any little service which they had rendered might appear mercenary: but Mrs. Smith succeeded in over-ruling their scruples, by assuring them that the "trifles" she proffered were merely to be regarded as proofs of a sincere friendship.

This matter being arranged, Mrs. Smith hinted in a delicate way that, for certain reasons which she considered it unnecessary to explain, it would be

better to keep the incidents of the past night as secret as possible; and the sisters readily promised to obey this injunction, observing however that they could not do otherwise than inform their father on his return of what had occurred. But they assured Mrs. Smith that he was by no means likely either to find fault with them for receiving the ladies into the house, nor to mention the circumstances elsewhere.

These precautions being adopted, Mrs. Smith sent as soon as it was dusk for Mr. Thurston, who arrived shortly afterwards. She then paid him the stipulated sum of ten thousand pounds; and the moment had now arrived for Mrs. Mordaunt to part with her child. The scene was a painful one: for although that infant was the living evidence of the young mother's frailty and the proof of her dishonour, yet did she already experience a parent's love for the innocent babe; and, contemplating it with mournful and passionate affection, her countenance was for a few instants animated with the blushful glow of strange inward exultation.

But, alas! she was compelled to resign the hapless babe to the care of strangers,—to separate from it —disowning it at once and for ever! The sacrifice was torturing to her soul: but there was no alternative—no choice;—and when the child was gently taken from her by Mrs. Smith, the wretched parent covered her face with her fair white hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

In a few minutes the unconscious cause of all this mental suffering was carefully enveloped in thick shawls: and Matilda, bearing it in her arms, accompanied the surgeon to his own abode. On her return she was enabled to give the young mother the consolatory assurance that Mrs. Thurston had already provided a wet-nurse for the infant, and that every preparation had been made to give a suitable reception to the little stranger.

On the following morning, while it was yet dusk, a plain travelling-carriage drove up to the door; and Mrs. Mordaunt, well wrapped up to guard her as much as possible against cold, was conveyed into the vehicle. Mrs. Smith followed her—Matilda took her place on the box by the side of the valet Pembroke, who was in attendance—and the equipage drove rapidly away in a northern direction.

We should observe that the two ladies had not forgotten to express their gratitude to the sisters for the hospitality which they had experienced at the villa: and Mrs. Smith promised to call upon them as early as circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. PAGE AND MR. HODSON.—THE BOW STREET OFFICER.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn, just after he had been aroused from his slumbers by the addlepated constables from Aylesbury.

Having hastily dressed himself, the commercial traveller descended in no very pleasant humour to the public room, where he ordered breakfast; and as he happened to be the only person there at the time, he was thrown entirely on the companionship of his own reflections.

These were far from being of an agreeable nature. Indeed, Mr. Page was placed in a cruel embarrassment from which he knew not precisely how to extricate himself: for it was certain that his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley of Wood Street, would hear of his arrival in London—and they would think it very strange if he did not call upon them without delay. But how was he to make his appearance at their counting-house, and not offer to place in their hands the bills of exchange which he had received from their provincial correspondents? He dared not confess that he had been robbed of those documents: for even if Hodson and Morley did not suspect his honesty, they would be sure to blame his carelessness—and his discharge from their employment must inevitably follow.

What was he to do? He was more than half inclined to keep away from Wood Street until the morrow, hoping in the mean time to recover his pocket-book; for it must be observed that he possessed a friend from whom he well knew he could borrow the fifty guineas requisite to redeem it, and he felt assured that the robber would keep to his agreement, the bills of exchange being of no possible value to him.

On the other hand, if he *did* delay his visit to the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley, he was certain to be questioned upon the subject; and a plea of temporary indisposition was not likely to avail him with gentlemen of such business-habits as his employers.

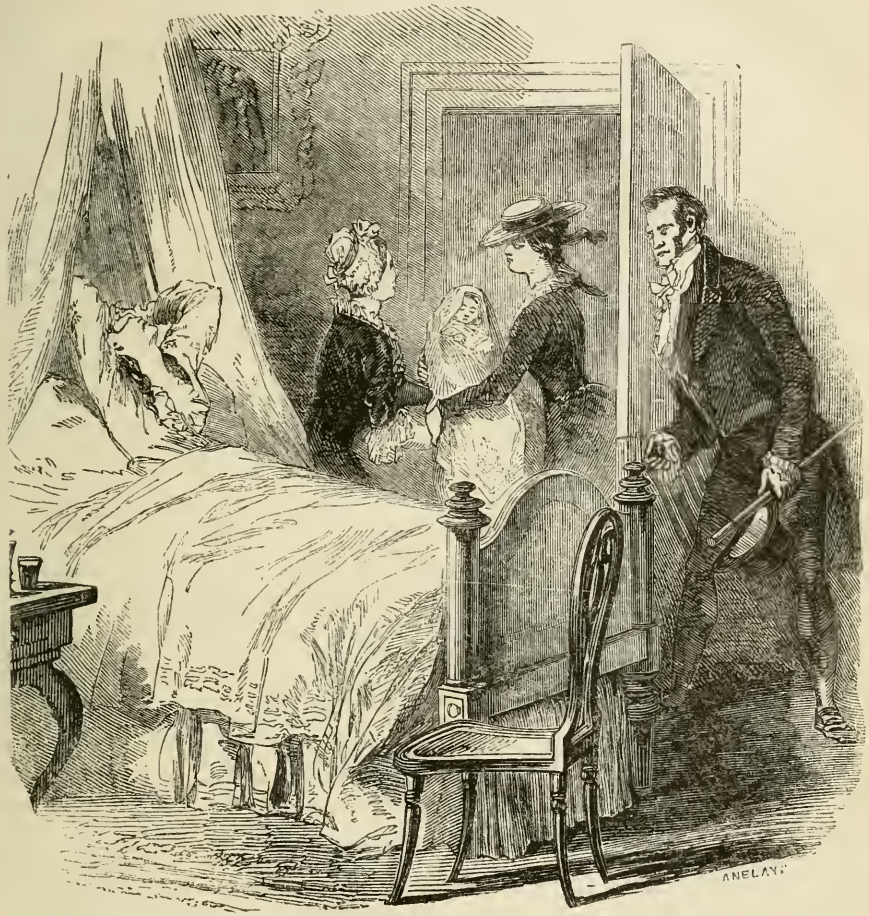
In a state of complete bewilderment did Mr. Page sit down to his breakfast. He inwardly cursed Sir Richard Stamford—the Aylesbury constables—the reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet—and the disagreeable individual whom he had encountered in the lane, and who delighted in the appellation of Joe the Magsman. Then having thus profusely distributed his maledictions, Mr. Page concluded by d——g his own folly, and invoking sundry imprecations on his own eyes and limbs.

He was in one of those humours when nothing seems good to the appetite or satisfactory to the mind. He denounced the coffee as ditch-water—the bacon as musty—the eggs as tasting of straw—and the butter as train-oil; and he was just inflicting a sassarara upon the waiter for not keeping up a cheerful fire, when the door opened, and, to the ineffable dismay of the commercial traveller, Mr. Hodson entered the room.

The senior partner in one of the largest commercial firms in Wood Street, was a man of about fifty years of age, and was dressed in the fashion of what was the "old school" at that period. He wore powder and a pig-tail, a square cut coat, knee-breeches and gaiters, and a waistcoat with large flaps over the hips: a massive gold chain with a number of seals depended to his fob; and he carried a gold-headed cane in his hand. In person he was short and stout: his countenance, though with the roundness and redness usually indicative of good humour, was somewhat stern in expression; and his look was cold, business-like, and even suspicious.

Such was the individual who now made his unwelcome appearance in the coffee-room; and the moment his eyes lighted upon Mr. Page, they remarked the confusion which suddenly seized upon that individual.

Affecting, however, not to notice the unaccountable dismay which his presence thus caused, and



which the commercial traveller almost instantaneously endeavoured to veil beneath a forced composure, Mr. Hodson approached the table, and took a seat, observing, "How do you do, Mr. Page? I felt assured, from your last letter, that you would arrive in town yesterday evening; and as I was passing this way, I thought I might as well give you a call."

"Thank you, sir—I am really much obliged to you for this kindess, sir—very much obliged, sir," stammered the commercial traveller. "How is Mr. Morley, sir?"

"He is quite well," responded Mr. Hodson: "that is to say, well in health, Mr. Page—but in regard to spirits, I cannot give an equally satisfactory account."

"Indeed, sir?" exclaimed Page, interrogatively.

"The fact is," continued Mr. Hodson, "Berkeley and Trent have stopped payment—and the result is that our house experiences a very heavy loss."

"Berkeley and Trent of Friday Street, sir!" cried the commercial traveller. "I thought they stood *A* 1 in the trade?"

"And so did we," observed Hodson. "The contrary, however, has been made sadly apparent; and this very day have we two of their bills thrown back on our hands."

"I—I am extremely sorry to—to hear it, sir," faltered Page, now feeling convinced that his employers would require the documents contained in the pocket-book. "I hope that the loss does not put you to any serious inconvenience, sir?" he added.

"Why—I think we can get over it," answered Mr. Hodson, his countenance now relaxing into a species of grim smile: for the man was worth thousands and could have stood up against the bankruptcies of a dozen correspondents or agents. "But we require at once all the securities we can get together, to pay into our bankers': and as I am going direct to them, I thought I might as well look in and obtain from

you the bills which you received at Aylesbury and elsewhere, and of which you duly advised us."

Mr. Page poured the milk into the sugar-basin instead of his tea-cup, in the confusion which attended his endeavour to look unabashed; and then raising his eyes furtively towards his employer's countenance, he beheld that gentleman surveying him with an intensity which suddenly became exceeding painful to endure.

"And therefore," continued the merchant, "you may at once hand me over those bills; and you can call at your leisure in Wood Street to settle the other matters with Mr. Morley."

"Do you want the—the bills at once—I mean directly, sir?" stammered Page, wishing that the floor would open and swallow up either himself or his master, he did not care which at the moment.

"To be sure I do," was the answer, delivered with a mixture of indignation and amazement.

"Then, sir—I must throw myself upon your mercy," returned Page, a cold tremor coming over him,—"for I shall not be able to give them to you until to-morrow morning—or perhaps to-night at ten o'clock."

"The devil you wont!—and why not?" ejaculated Mr. Hodson. "Come, sir—speak out at once! I see that there is some mystery in all this."

"There is indeed, sir," cried Page; "and I hope you will not be angry with me. But the truth is I was robbed——"

"Robbed!" repeated the merchant, now eyeing his traveller with unmistakable suspicion. "Then, why did you not tell the truth at once?"

"Because I was afraid of your being angry, sir," was the answer: "and I have every expectation of recovering the bills this night. The thief agreed to deliver them up on receiving fifty guineas: and he has made an appointment with me to that effect."

"And you will of course give him into custody?" said Mr. Hodson, not knowing precisely what to make of this story.

"I don't dare do it, sir!" exclaimed Page, with a strong emphasis. "The villain assured me that if I attempted anything of the kind, I should have a bullet through my head. Besides, he is not to come himself, but will send a young woman dressed in black."

"Justice cannot be thus cheated of its due, Mr. Page," observed the merchant, in a severe tone. "Granting all you have told me to be strictly true, there is a certain line of conduct to be adopted in this case, and which our duty to society renders imperative. Put on your hat, sir—and come with me."

The wretched commercial traveller dared not offer any objection to this command; and he accordingly followed Mr. Hodson, who strode out of the hotel with all the purse-proud pompousness of his nature. The way that he took was the most direct to Bow Street; and on arriving there, he requested an audience of Mr. Peter Grumley, who was one of the officers attached to the police-court and the most famous thief-taker of the day.

Being shown into a private room, Mr. Hodson and the commercial traveller were speedily waited upon by a middle-aged man, six feet in height, of large proportions, and evidently endowed with a herculean amount of strength. He was attired in a shabby style: but this was from habitual neglect, and not from necessity, as his calling was a most lucrative one. In his hand he carried a substantial stick, or rather a bludgeon; and his coat-pockets stuck out suspiciously as if they contained pistols.

This was Mr. Peter Grumley; and to him did the merchant unfold the purport of his visit. The officer listened with great attention—never once opening his lips until Mr. Hodson had concluded all he had to say.

"And this is the genelman which was robbed?" he at length observed, jerking the thumb of his left hand over his shoulder towards Mr. Page, who was standing a little in his rear: for the officer was sitting in a lounging manner upon the edge of a table.

"Yes—this is my commercial traveller," answered the merchant; "and he will give you any additional information you may require."

"Good and well," said Grumley, laconically. "Was you a-coming home in your vehicle?" he demanded, now turning round and taking a calm but lengthened survey of Mr. Page, who felt very uncomfortable indeed under the scrutiny.

"No—not exactly," was the reply. "I—I was on foot at the time. In fact, it was after I had put up my horse and shay at the George and Blue Boar."

"Well—and where did the robbery take place?" asked Grumley.

"In a dark and narrow lane leading out of the Edgeware Road—about a mile up, on the left hand."

"And what were you doing in such an out-of-the-way quarter with *my* property in your possession?" demanded Mr. Hodson, angrily.

Page saw that it was useless to attempt any farther concealment of the real truth—especially as disagreeable suspicions might fall upon himself. He accordingly related, without more hesitation, all the particulars of his adventures on the preceding evening; and when he had told his story, he felt relieved of a heavy load.

"So it was the Magsman which stopped you—eh?" observed Mr. Grumley, in a musing tone. "You see it's all right and straightfor'ard enow, sir," he continued, turning towards Mr. Hodson; "and your traveller really has been robbed. I don't think he's told no lies about it," added the officer, expressing the opinion with as much coolness as if it were a high compliment paid to Mr. Page's honesty.

"What can be done in the case?" inquired the merchant.

"We must see," was the vague and general answer. "I've long been on the look-out for Joe the Magsman: but he's the cunningest dog in all London as well as one of the most desperatest. As for the young woman he talks of sending to manage this business to-night, she's his mistress. The *Gallows' Widow* they call her, because her husband was hanged a couple of years or so back: and she's wore weeds ever since—not on account of any particklar love she had for him, but because black clothes makes one look more respectable and is a better dodge to carry on business in her line. It would be a blessed thing to break up the whole gang—for there's a lot on 'em as is in league with the landlord of the Beggar's Staff."

"I am sure that Mr. Page will render you all the assistance in his power," observed Mr. Hodson; "and in that case I can promise, both for 'self and partner, that his harum-scarum imprudence of last night shall be overlooked. It is a duty we owe to society, to

lend a helping hand in exterminating such dreadful miscreants as these of whom you have been speaking."

"Well—if so be Mr. Page has pluck enough to enter into the business, we can manage it, I've no doubt," said Grumley, swinging one of his legs backward and forward, and surveying the movement with infinite complacency. "Be you agreeable, sir?" he asked, suddenly raising his head and fixing his small grey eyes inquiringly on the commercial traveller.

"Certainly he is," hastily exclaimed the merchant, without allowing the principal party concerned to speak for himself. "Are you not, Mr. Page?"

"Oh! decidedly, sir," responded this individual, summoning to his aid as much courage as he could command: although, in the secret recesses of his soul, he did not at all admire the prospect of placing himself in collision with Joe the Magsman and the Gallows' Widow.

"There's a hundred pound reward offered for the apprehension of the Magsman," observed Mr. Grumley, deliberately unrolling a bundle of bills printed in ominously large type, and displaying the one which related to a certain Joseph Warren. "A hundred pound to be got," he repeated; "and therefore me and Mr. Page will go sheers."

"That's business-like!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, his countenance brightening up at the prospect of a recompense for the risk he was about to encounter.

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Grumley, "you must keep the appintment punctual this evening; and when you meet the Gallows' Widow, you must tell her that you want to see Joe the Magsman about some partickler business, and that you're going on as far as the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown. If so be the Magsman is in the neighbourhood at the time, watching your interview with his woman, she'll most likely take you to him. If not, she'll say that you can go with her to the flash boozing-ken But in any case you *must* go on to the Beggar's Staff; and then leave all the rest to me."

"Am I to go alone?" inquired Page, with some degree of surprise and dissatisfaction at the arrangements proposed.

"To be sure!" answered the officer. "Why—what a fool's trick it would be to make your appearance with a troop of constables at your back. The rascals would take the alarm, and in a few minutes they'd be no-where. Don't be afraid, sir: assistance will be pretty nigh, I can tell you."

"Very good," remarked Page. "And supposing that I am introduced into the presence of this Magsman, as he calls himself—what excuse had I better make for wanting to see him?"

"Why, you'll tell him that you're in the employ of a very rich firm in the city, and that having made a mull of your accounts, you're grown desperate and don't mind helping to rob 'em," said the officer. "The Magsman will snap at the bait; and so, if we don't succeed in grabbing him to-night, we shall be preparing a plant to catch him in Wood Street. But you must mind and do it properly—or else the whole thing 'll fail, and he 'll grow cunninger than ever."

"I understand," observed Page; "and you may depend upon it that when I *do* enter into a thing, it is with a determination to go on boldly."

"So much the better," exclaimed Grumley. "And now, genelmen, as my time is precious and I've got certain little arrangements to make for to-night, I'll say good bye for the present."

Mr. Hodson slipped a few guineas into the officer's hand; and then took his departure, accompanied by Page.

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING IN LONDON.—THE GALLOWS' WIDOW.

It was nine o'clock in the evening; and a misty rain was falling.

The lamps shone dimly as if through a fog: the streets were covered with a slimy mud;—and Father Thames rolled through the arches of London bridge with a moaning sound.

The wayfarers in the streets hurried along in a manner which showed that they would not be abroad unless business or necessity compelled them: those who had umbrellas were a trifle less sullen in looks than those who had none;—and these latter appeared as miserable as scanty clothing, inclement weather, and the jostling of crowds on the filthy slippery pavement could possibly render them.

Young seamstresses taking home the work which they had toiled hard to accomplish by a certain time,—milliner-girls returning to their poor lodgings,—women of pleasure in their flaunting garbs, contrasting so strangely with the aspect of the evening,—poor men's wives going to purchase the frugal supper at some cheap shop,—and old crones shuffling along to the public-house,—these were all mingled pell-mell in the myriad thoroughfares of the mighty metropolis—and the eye of the acute observer might single out each and assign her to the particular class to which she belonged.

Of the male sex there were the ill-paid and half-starved clerk—the artizan, wearied with his hard day's labour—the needy adventurer in his shabby-genteel suit—the small tradesman, running about to collect in a few debts for the purpose of meeting a payment on the morrow—the old libertine whom no weather could keep out of the streets when the frail sisterhood walked abroad—the young rake puffing his cigar and nodding familiarly to the loose females whom he passed—the drunkard reeling home from the tavern—and the shivering beggar gazing wistfully at the windows of the bakers' shops and the eating-houses.

Then, too, might be observed the pauper-woman with an infant in her arms and a little family of shoeless and stockingless children trooping along miserably behind her:—here a ballad-singer, standing in the gutter, had collected a small knot of idlers;—and there a costermonger was pushing along his barrow, reckless of whose shins he might bruise or break at the crossings.

Amidst the people thus passing to and fro in all directions might be observed the juvenile pickpocket, with rapid walk as if intent upon gaining some particular destination, although in reality having no settled point in view; while the older thief sauntered more leisurely along, with his hands in his own pockets as if he had not the slightest intention of dipping them into the pockets of others.

The shop-windows were all rendered dim by the rain that settled upon them: the coloured waters in the chemists' dispensaries reflected a sinister light upon the countenances of the passers-by;—and the

chains, watches, and ear-rings in the jewellers' windows shone only like tarnished gold.

While the wealthy and the well-off were seated at home, in their warm rooms and by their cheerful fires, how many thousands of houseless wretches were wandering about the wet streets—or crowding in gateways—or lying crouched up on the door-steps! In the mansions of the great there were luxuriously spread tables, the delicious viands being served up on silver, and the generous wines sparkling through crystal;—and at the same time, and in the same city, children were crying for food in cold, damp, and wretched garrets. While the merchant sate down to his supper, rejoicing in the day's gains which amounted to hundreds, the hard-working man was devouring a sorry crust, the thought that he had no employment for the morrow imparting bitterness to the sorry meal!

But let us return to our narrative.

It was, as we have observed, nine o'clock in the evening when Mr. Page, enveloped in a cloak, and with a thick shawl-kerchief tied round his neck, reached that point whence Tooley Street branched off from the foot of Old London Bridge.

Being very cold, he entered a public-house to take a dram at the bar; and while drinking the same, his eyes happened to light upon the countenance of Mr. Grumley, who was seated in a corner smoking a pipe in a manner so free and easy, that no one unacquainted with him could possibly have suspected that he had any important business in hand.

Giving a slight and rapid sign of intelligence to Page, the officer raised a pewter-pot to his lips, and indulged in a long draught of porter; and the commercial traveller, understanding that the Bow Street functionary did not wish to be spoken to or in any way recognised, paid for his dram, and quitted the house.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when he observed a female attired in deep black within a few yards of him; and as she passed, she stared at him in a peculiar manner. The light of the tavern-lamp, dim though it were, gave him a good view of her countenance, which, in spite of its paleness, retained the traces of great beauty. She was of middle height—thin, but not badly shaped;—and when she had ceased to gaze so intently upon the commercial traveller, she suddenly assumed a demeanour so retiring and modest that a stranger would have taken her for the wife of a small tradesman or respectable mechanic.

Page felt convinced that this was the woman whom he had to meet; and he was hesitating whether to follow her or not, when she turned back; and as she repassed him, she again regarded him with a peculiar significancy.

"One moment, young woman," said Page, touching her upon the shoulder as she was walking rapidly on. "Are you looking for any one?"

"I have found something and am in search of the owner," she replied, in a voice that was far from disagreeable, her lips at the same time revealing a very good set of teeth.

"Then I am the person you want," returned the commercial traveller; "and I have got fifty guineas to pay you."

"Who told you to meet me here, sir?" asked the woman, examining him attentively.

"A person called Joe the Magsman," was the immediate response.

"Good!" remarked the Gallows' Widow. "Follow me."

And thus speaking, she led the way into a narrow court forming the side entrance to a pawnbroker's shop: then, stopping short under a lamp over the door of that establishment, she said, "Give me the money,"—at the same time producing the much coveted pocket-book.

Page handed her a small canvass bag containing the gold: but before she parted with his property, she drew out a quantity of the money, examined the pieces with a keen though rapid glance, and having thus satisfied herself that they were genuine, gave him his pocket-book.

"You may open it, sir," she remarked; "and everything will be found quite safe. The bills were of no use to us."

The commercial traveller hastily inspected the documents; and perceiving that the woman had spoken the truth, he secured the pocket-book about his person. The Gallows' Widow was then about to take her departure; but Page stopped her, saying, "I want very much to see your friend the Magsman as early as convenient. Indeed, I did think of pushing my way as far as the Beggar's Staff this evening."

The female darted upon him a look of suspicion; but the commercial traveller kept his countenance admirably—and he saw *her* features gradually relapse into an expression of confidence.

"Well," she said, after a brief pause, "I am going that way—and so you can accompany me if you choose."

"Willingly," answered Page.

And away they went together.

Plunging now into the vile, filthy, and dangerous district on the southern bank of the Thames,—a neighbourhood which was lighted only by the shop-windows and not by street-lamps,—and unable to see his way clearly enough to avoid the pools of water and the heaps of mud which abounded in that locality,—the commercial traveller walked by his companion's side, at first in profound silence. In fact, he had quite enough to do in endeavouring to pick his path: for at one moment he stumbled over a stone—at another he trod upon a dead dog,—then he slipped into a hole, spattering himself even to the very countenance with slime—and next he was wading through a pile of filth accumulated at some corner. The farther he went, the darker became the neighbourhood; for the inhabitants were shutting up their shops, and the sky was so densely covered with clouds that not a glimpse of moonlight nor a single star relieved the obscurity of the scene.

Having proceeded some distance along Tooley Street, the Gallows' Widow turned up Mill Lane, Page still keeping by her side; and breaking the long silence which had prevailed, he observed, "This is a frightful neighbourhood."

"I dare say—to those who are not accustomed to it," replied the woman.

"But you seem to walk easily and comfortably enough without splashing yourself," said the commercial traveller.

"I know every inch of the way," was the answer.

Page wished that he did;—but as such was not the case, he was compelled to make the best of it.

"Where are we going now?" he demanded, as his guide took a turning to the right.

"Along Pickled Herring Street," she responded.

In this throughfare the houses were all shut up; and it was only when a light gleamed from some window, that Page could catch a glimpse of the principal features of the path which he was pursuing. That the Thames was close by, he however knew, alike from his general acquaintance with London, and from the low moaning of the vast volume of water as it rolled onward in its mighty bed;—and then it struck him how easy it would be for evil-intentioned persons to assail, rob, and murder the defenceless individual in that lonely district, and dispose of the corpse in the river that was so near at hand. Shuddering at this idea, he looked back to ascertain if any one resembling a constable was following: but the darkness was so intense that he could distinguish nothing even at a distance of three or four yards.

At length the young woman stopped at the corner of Horslydown, which is a street branching off to the right; and, hastily seizing the arm of her companion, she drew him into a deep door-way, saying, "We will remain here a few minutes, if you please."

"But for what purpose?" asked Page, astonished at the movement.

"Hush!" whispered the Gallows' Widow.

A profound silence now reigned, disturbed only by the gurgling of the adjacent waters as they broke against the piles of a wharf: but in a short time footsteps were heard approaching, and the woman again caught the commercial traveller by the arm, to retain him in the door-way and impress upon him the necessity of keeping silence. Almost immediately afterwards, the form of a man passed the place where they were concealed; and it was easy to judge by his footsteps that he turned the corner into Horslydown.

"We must remain a few minutes longer, if you please, sir," said the woman, in a whisper so low that had Page been a foot farther off he could not have distinguished the words that were thus uttered.

In a very short time another man passed the door-way, and likewise turned into Horslydown; and when the echoes of his steps had died away, the Gallows' Widow again requested her companion to stay a little longer in that recess.

It now struck Page that the two men whom he had seen pass that way, were not altogether unconnected with the present adventure: in fact, he felt assured that they were constables on the watch. But almost simultaneously with this idea, the suspicion flashed to his mind that the Gallows' Widow might be waiting in that dark concealment to ascertain if her footsteps were dogged; and a cold trembling came over him as he contemplated the perils which he was encountering—the desperate character of the man whom he sought to deliver into the hands of justice—and the horrible neighbourhood in which he was pursuing this dangerous course.

"What are you waiting for?" he suddenly demanded of his companion in a whisper.

"Hush!—more footsteps are approaching," was the prompt reply, also delivered in a tone barely audible.

"But I do not choose——" began Page, his terror gaining upon him.

"Silence—or I will blow your brains out!" was the low, but hasty and emphatic rejoinder: and at the same time the commercial traveller felt the cold muzzle of a pistol touch his cheek.

An appalling consternation seized upon him; and had he not been leaning against the wall in the deep door-way, he would have fallen to the ground. Another man passed along the street, and turned into Horslydown.

"We will remain a little longer," said the woman. "But if you dare move or make a noise, I shall instantly suspect some treachery—and I will put a bullet into you with as little ceremony as if you was a mad dog that had bit me."

As she spoke, she withdrew the pistol from its alarming contact with the commercial traveller's face: but at the same instant its ominous click fell upon his ears, as if to warn him that the Gallows' Widow did not waste her words in idle threats.

He was horror-struck at the ferocious character which the woman had thus displayed so suddenly. Her pale, pensive, and even mild countenance appeared totally incompatible with such a daring and desperate spirit;—and her manner was so reserved and subdued that it seemed impossible for her disposition to arouse itself to such a terrible energy.

While Page was making these reflections, which stole upon him in spite of the alarm that he now experienced, nearly ten minutes had elapsed; and during that interval not another soul had passed along the street.

"We will go now," said the Gallows' Widow at last.

They accordingly emerged from their place of concealment, and turned into Horslydown.

Page was more than half-inclined to give his companion the slip and rush away as quickly as his legs might carry him: for he did not at all admire the circumstances which had just occurred. But no sooner had the thought of escape risen up in his mind, when innumerable reasons suggested themselves against it. He dreaded the wrath of Mr. Hodson—he feared to lose his employment in that individual's service—he longed to gain a share of the reward for capturing Joe the Magsman—and he trembled lest his formidable female companion should send a bullet whizzing after him, were he to raise her suspicions by attempting to decamp.

But he was still balancing which course to pursue, when the woman suddenly observed, "Here we are;"—and as she pushed Page gently on in front, he mustered up all his courage and entered the notorious boozing-ken

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGGAR'S STAFF.

In a long, low, and ill-lighted room, a number of men and women were seated at tables, some of them engaged in eating their suppers, and all having drinking materials before them.

Though the weather was so cold without, an intense heat pervaded this place: for at one end was a fire which blazed from an enormous kitchen-grate half-way up the wide-mouthed chimney. The cloud of tobacco-smoke which spread like a haze throughout the apartment, and appeared to hang like a mass of dingy drapery to the ceiling, augmented this heat, and produced a stifling sensation in Page's throat. The vapour appeared to be of a darker hue in cor

sequence of the blackness of the ceiling and the walls, which were seen dimly through it; while the floor was so begrimed with dirt that it seemed as if the cleansing effect of water was unknown at the Beggar's Staff.

On the side of the room nearest to the street there was a long and very narrow window, covered with a blind of baize which once was green, but had completely faded into a dirty brown. On the opposite side was a semicircular counter, or bar, behind which an open door afforded a glimpse of a little den, denominated "the parlour."

Within the bar stood a fat, burly, red-faced man, with a dirty cotton nightcap upon his head and a short pipe in his mouth. Having thrown off his coat in consequence of the heat, he was now in his shirt-sleeves; and his linen was certainly the foulest ever thus displayed. His countenance was sinister and forbidding; and his bloated appearance indicated that he was no indifferent admirer of his own liquors.

This individual, we need scarcely observe, was the landlord of the Beggar's Staff; and though his name was in reality Stephen Price, as proved by the inscription on the sign in front of the house, his customers invariably denominated him *the Big Beggarman.*

He was assisted in his occupation at the bar by his daughter—a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, and whose forbidding features contrasted strangely in their vixenish sharpness with the coarse and bloated countenance of her sire. She was dressed in a very slovenly manner: her flaming red hair was in such disorder that it looked for all the world as if she had been creeping through a bush;—and her face and hands appeared to have had a desperate quarrel with soap and cut it accordingly. Her gown was open in front, displaying her scraggy neck and chest —for she was as flat in respect to bosom as one of the opposite sex. Her Christian name was properly Mary: but the *sobriquet* by which she was commonly known, was either *Carrotty Poll*, or plain *Carrots.*

The wall behind the bar was arranged with shelves, whereon stood a variety of drinking vessels, bottles of ardent spirits, jars of tobacco, and plates and dishes—these last being for the accommodation of those customers who cooked their own meals at the huge fire blazing in the grate. Within the bar, and raised upon tressels of rough-hewn timber, were two vast barrels—one of porter, the other of ale: for the apparatus whereby malt liquor could be drawn from the cellar into the bar, was not as yet invented.

Over the little door which has already been mentioned as leading into the *parlour*, was painted—or rather scrawled with a paint-brush, the ensuing droggrel:—

> All them as comes to ask for beer,
> Must tip the ready rhino here:
> For pipes and bakker please to pay
> Afore you takes the things away;—
> For bingo and blue ruin too
> Naught but the stumpy down will do:
> Short reckoning makes long-standing friends—
> While tick in strife and trouble ends.
> And when you go, I hope you'll not
> Walk off with glass or pewter pot.

The rules and recommendations laid down in this precious composition would not have appeared unnecessary or misplaced in the eyes of any one who studied the aspect of the company present: for a more villanous and repulsive assembly of human beings it would be difficult to conceive.

Rascality and dissipation characterised the countenances of the men—profligacy and debauchery marked those of the women. Many, of both sexes, were in rags: others were more comfortably attired; —and a few were flashly dressed. But the unmistakable stamp of inveterate vice and loathsome immorality was upon them all; and if any doubt as to their principles had existed in the mind of a person entering upon that scene for the first time, the conversation which was going on would have cleared up all uncertainty in a very few moments.

The women positively appeared anxious to outvie the men in the horrible nature of their oaths, the disgusting obscenity of their jests, and the coarse frankness with which they glorified in their profligacy. Some of the younger females assumed the most lascivious attitudes, in order to wheedle the men out of their money or induce them to expend it profusely; and here and there might be seen half-drunken thieves and burglars rendered maudlin by ardent spirits, sitting with these wanton girls upon their knees and with their hands in their bosoms.

When Page first entered the room, preceding the Gallows' Widow in the manner already described, he could scarcely distinguish any object through the dense cloud of tobacco smoke: but in a very few moments the persons present and the features of the place developed themselves rapidly, the same as the ships of a fleet stand out in bold relief as the smoke of their cannon rolls away. In this case, however, the smoke did *not* dissipate: but the eyes of the commercial traveller grew accustomed to it —and when the scene became fully apparent, his first impulse was to turn aside in loathing and effect a rapid retreat. But the remembrance of the Gallows' Widow's pistol, and a sense of the imprudence of exciting her suspicions, or of strengthening them if she already entertained any with regard to the object of his visit to the Beggar's Staff,—all this flashed to his mind and prompted him to assume as courageous an air and as unembarrassed a demeanour as possible.

The Gallows' Widow, on her entrance, was warmly greeted by several of the men and women present; and one or two drawing her aside, spoke to her in whispers—their manner indicating that they were asking questions relative to her companion. Her replies were evidently satisfactory, though hurried; and, beckoning Page to accompany her, she conducted him straight up to the bar. Carotty Poll obligingly opened the little gate or door which closed the barrier at the side; and the Gallows' Widow, exchanging a familiar nod with that female, entered the parlour, followed by Page.

The Big Beggarman attended upon them, closing the door behind him; and the commercial traveller now found himself in a little room, scarcely large enough to hold six persons, and dimly lighted by a single candle. The walls were black with smoke and dirt;—the floor was strewed with sand;—and the scanty furniture was old and ricketty. A small, low door stood at one end of the place.

"Well, what news, my beauty?" demanded the Beggarman, addressing the Gallows' Widow in a familiar tone; "and who is this swell-cove?" he inquired, glancing towards the commercial traveller.

"The affair of the pocket-book," was the Gallows' Widow's laconic answer as she took a seat.

"Ain't it settled, then?" asked the landlord.

"Yes: and the gentleman wants to see my man," responded the female. "But to speak candidly, I am suspicious—I am afraid there is something wrong; and therefore we had better question him first."

"Oh! that's it—eh?" exclaimed the Beggarman: and taking up the candle, he held it close to the countenance of the commercial traveller, saying, "If so be he means treachery, I shall see it depicted in his wisage—and then I'm blowed if we don't make a stiff 'un of him in no time."

This menace caused Page's blood to run cold in his veins: but arming himself with the courage of desperation, and to some degree sustained by the idea that succour was at hand in case of emergency, he underwent the scrutiny of the landlord without moving a muscle of his face. Indeed, he returned the stare of the man with a steady look of calm defiance, and passed through the ordeal in a way which was positively astonishing to himself.

"It's all right—or I'm deucedly deceived," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, at length replacing the candle upon the table. "But we'll see what the nib-like cove has to say for himself. First, howsomever, I suppose he'll stand a bottle of wine?"

"With great pleasure," observed Page, thrusting his hand into his pocket.

"Port—eh?" said the landlord.

A sign in the affirmative was made by the Gallows' Widow, to whom the query was addressed; and the Big Beggarman speedily produced the wine. Then having placed glasses on the table, he took a chair, bidding Page imitate his example.

"And now, my good sir," said the bloated fellow, after having filled the glasses; "you will perhaps taste the lush and then favour us with an explanation relative to this visit."

"The wine is good," observed the commercial traveller, setting down the glass which he had emptied, and paying a compliment to the Port which it was far from deserving. "But to come to business, I must ask what guarantee I have that you won't peach against me for anything I am going to say, supposing you and your friends refuse to join in the matter."

"This isn't the shop where it's necessary to put such questions, my good gentleman," responded the Beggarman. "Three inches of cold steel under the ribs is the reward *we* give for treachery—and as the Thames runs pretty handy, there's no difficulty in disposing of the dead'un."

"Well, I will trust you," said Page, who had appeared to hesitate only for the purpose of giving a better colour to the part he was playing. "The truth is I'm a commercial traveller——"

"In the employ of Hodson and Morley of Wood Street," interrupted the Beggarman; "and your name's Page. Go on."

"How did you know all that?" demanded the bag-man, in astonishment.

"The pocket-book was our authority," answered the landlord. "What! do you suppose we didn't overhaul it while it was in our keeping?"

"Ah!—true!" ejaculated Page. "Well, the fact is that this affair of the robbery made my employers so cursed suspicious—as it naturally might—that they insisted in going into my accounts; and I wasn't very well prepared for the investigation."

"That's the case with a many of you bag-men," observed the landlord.

"Unfortunately it is," returned the commercial traveller. "You see we are naturally a jovial set and when we get together ——"

"Pray go on as quick as possible, sir," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, in a tone of impatience.

"I beg your pardon for digressing," said Page. "To come to the point, then, I am placed in a very awkward predicament. My accounts are most disagreeably inaccurate—and I stand a chance of having to give an explanation to the Lord Mayor, and afterwards to the Recorder of London, unless I can get together a couple of hundred pounds by the day after to-morrow."

"And so you think that it would be as well to finger some of your employers' hard cash, in order to pay them in their own coin?" observed the Beggarman. "I begin to twig, you see," he added with a knowing wink.

"You're just right," responded Page. "If I am to be transported, it may as well be for a burglary as for embezzlement—and that's the plain English of it."

"Spoken like a man!" cried the Big Beggarman, exultingly. "The thing's as clear as daylight," he added, turning towards the Gallows' Widow: "this gentleman will assist in robbing his employers; and therefore we must suppose that he is well acquainted with the place where they keep their cash and the probable amount that is to be got by the venture."

"I know that they never have less than seven or eight hundred pounds in the strong-box," said Page; "and I should not be fool enough to risk the matter unless I was convinced that success is certain."

"We may let him see the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her abrupt, laconic way: for the suspicions which she had previously entertained were now almost completely dissipated. "Follow me, sir," she added; and rising from her seat, the woman opened the little door already mentioned.

"Take the candle with you, my gal," said the Beggarman. "I must remain at the bar; for there's no lack of customers to-night."

The Gallows' Widow took up the light, and began to ascend a staircase so steep and narrow that it was a wonder to Page how such a bloated personage as the landlord could ever force himself into so circumscribed a space: for that he *was* occasionally compelled to pass that way to the upper regions of the house, the commercial traveller naturally conceived.

The landing on the first floor was very small, and had two doors opening from it: but the woman, pausing not there, commenced the ascent of another flight as ladder-like as the former; and on reaching the top, she led the way into a large loft immediately beneath the angular roof.

Page looked rapidly around, in the expectation of beholding the Magsman: for as there appeared to be no other door than the one by which they had just entered the place, he as a matter of course presumed that they had reached their destination.

He was however mistaken.

Giving Page the candle to hold, the Gallows' Widow speedily removed a quantity of straw that

was heaped up in one corner; and raising a trap-door, she commenced the descent of a flight of steps, bidding the commercial traveller to follow her.

He obeyed; but at this instant it struck him that should the Magsman suspect his treacherous purpose and seek to do him a mischief, how could he possibly summon the Bow Street Officers to his assistance?—how were they to learn whither he had been conducted?

Again did a cold tremor come over him: but experiencing a full sense of the necessity of maintaining his presence of mind, he summoned all his courage to his aid, and followed the woman with a firm step.

At the bottom of the stairs she threw open a door; and in another moment the commercial traveller was introduced into the presence of Joe the Magsman.

This redoubtable individual was seated in a small chamber, furnished in a far more comfortable style than the other portions of the house which Page had as yet seen; and the bed, which stood in an alcove, or deep recess, was clean and neat in appearance. The walls were papered: there was a thick curtain over the small window;—and a piece of carpet was stretched upon the floor.

The Magsman was about forty years of age,—very tall—powerfully built—and remarkably broad across the shoulders. But his countenance was precisely that which a novelist would describe or an artist depict as belonging to a villain of the most desperate character. His coal-black hair was rough and coarse: his brows were thick and long, overhanging small and restless eyes;—and his bushy whiskers encroached on his face even to the cheek bones. He was dressed in a shabby and negligent manner; and when Page was introduced by the Gallows' Widow into his presence, he was lounging in an arm-chair smoking a pipe.

"Ah! my fine fellow," he exclaimed, the moment the commercial traveller stood before him: "I needn't ask who you are—for I had a pretty good glimpse of your face last night in the lane. Sit down, my boy—and let us know what has brought you here. Lizzy my dear," he added, turning towards the Gallows' Widow, "put the bingo out upon the table."

The woman produced a bottle of brandy and some glasses from a cupboard, and then took a seat near her paramour.

"I suppose it's all right about the pocket-book?" said the Magsman.

"Yes—and here is the money," returned the Gallows' Widow, handing the ruffian the bag of gold which he tossed upon the bed. "This gentleman wishes some particular business to be done—and that is why I brought him. The Beggarman heard his story; and we agreed that he might be introduced to you without farther delay."

"And what is the nature of the business?" demanded the man.

Page forthwith repeated the same tale which he had already narrated in the parlour below; and the robber listened attentively.

"Well—what do you think of this, Lizzy?" he said, turning towards his mistress, when Page had done speaking.

"I think that it is all straightforward enough; or else I should not have brought him up here," was the answer. "I must however observe that I *did* entertain certain suspicions before we entered the house; for, according to my usual custom when bringing a stranger here, I stopped and made this gentleman stop also in a dark place just to ascertain whether any body in the shape of an officer was dogging us. Three men passed by, one after another, and at short intervals; but it was too dark to form an idea what they were. They however all three turned into Horslydown: and I confess that I didn't like it. But it might have been a false alarm on my part; and the conduct of this gentleman has since made me think it was."

While the Gallows' Widow was speaking, the Magsman's eyes were fixed not exactly suspiciously—but searchingly—upon the commercial traveller, who sustained this steadfast, scrutinizing gaze without wincing.

The Magsman seemed satisfied; and Mr. Page, perceiving that the result was in his favour, felt more at ease.

"And how do you propose to carry this business into execution?" demanded the robber, after sipping his brandy-and-water in a leisurely way.

"Hodson and Morley's place of business is in Wood Street, as you know already," answered Page, "and Hodson lives on the premises."

"How many men are there in the house at night?" interrupted the thief.

"Three," was the response: "Hodson—a man-servant—and the porter, who sleeps in the kitchen, a bed being made up for him on purpose."

"And of course he has fire-arms within reach?"

"Not that I know of. But there's a watchman in the street all night: he is paid by the inhabitants."

"And therefore he walks up and down," observed the Magsman: "so that while he's at one part of the street, we can be commencing operations in another."

"Exactly so," answered Page. "The cash-box is kept in an iron safe let into the wall in the counting-house, which is in the back ware-room; and there will be some trouble in picking the lock of that safe."

"Leave the matter to me," said the Magsman, in a tone of confidence. "D'ye think I'll have much trouble in opening it, Lizzy—eh?" he demanded, turning with a chuckle towards his mistress.

"Not much, Joe," she replied, laughing in a low quiet manner which did Page harm to hear it: for he fancied that a woman who could laugh in that strange way, was capable of any atrocity—there was something so unnatural in it!

"Where ought the entrance into the house to be attempted?" demanded the Magsman, after a brief pause.

"That is the difficulty!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, assuming a tone of vexation. "The front-door is precious strong and well chained and bolted; and the shutters to the warehouse-window are not a very insignificant barrier. If there was much noise made, the porter would be sure to wake up down-stairs."

"And there's no means of getting in at the back?" asked the robber.

"None that I know of," replied Page, purposely avoiding the creation of a suspicion by representing the business as one that had few difficulties in the way.

"Well—it must be attempted in front, then," said the Magsman. "We must manage to get down

one of the shutters—take out a square of glass—shove in a boy to open the front-door—and pop up the shutter again before the watchman comes along. The course is clear enough now: it is difficult, and even dangerous—but a mere flea-bite to things that I have done in my time."

Here again the Gallows' Widow laughed in her quiet way, as if it were to herself.

"Well," resumed the Magsman, "so far we have settled the matter. Now, where do we meet to-morrow night at about a quarter to twelve o'clock?"

"Name your own place—and I will be there to a minute," answered Page, delighted to think that the interview was drawing to an end.

"There's a flash-house in Grub Street, called the *Kinchin-Ken*," said the Magsman, after a few moments' reflection. "You will be there at a quarter to twelve: and it would be as well, perhaps," added the ruffian, "if you was to come in the shabbiest clothes you have."

"I will not forget," responded Page.

"Not in that slap-up cloak, mind," observed the Magsman: "but try and look as much like *one of us* as you can. The Kinchin-Ken is a noted house for young prigs—and there'll be a many there at the time; so that if you go amongst them in swell toggery it may be disagreeable."

"I shall bear in mind all you tell me," said Page, rising from his seat; and, having emptied his glass, he wished the robber a good night.

"Good-night, my ben-cull," returned the man extending his huge hand which the commercial traveller was compelled to shake: then, as Page turned towards the door, the robber said in a low, hurried, and scarcely audible whisper to the Gallows' Widow, "*Let one of the pals speel after the jagger and lear his lag.*"*

The woman darted a look of intelligence at her

* Let one of the comrades go after the gentleman and watch which way he goes.

paramour; and taking up the candle which she had brought with her, followed Page from the room.

They ascended the flight of steps leading to the loft; and there the woman replaced the trap-door which she covered with the straw. Thence they retraced their way to the little parlour down stairs; and Page, having wished the Big Beggarman, his daughter, and the Gallows' Widow good night, issued in safety from the Beggar's Staff.

But scarcely had he proceeded ten yards up the street, when a man darted from the establishment—crossed over the way—and, keeping in the black shade of the houses on that side, cautiously dogged the steps of the commercial traveller.

This individual pursued his way, quite unconscious of being thus watched, and wondering why Mr. Grumley and his men had remained so quiet,—a circumstance which he did not however regret, inasmuch as it had prevented a conflict wherein he himself might have been either killed or seriously injured. On reaching the corner of Horslydown, he turned into Pickled Herring Street, when some one, emerging from the very recess where he and the Gallows' Widow had concealed themselves on their way to the Beggar's Staff, said in a low and hurried tone, "Is that you, Mr. Page?"

"Yes," responded the commercial traveller, startled by the abruptness of the incident.

"Then come here for a moment," resumed the man who had spoken; and he half dragged Page into the recess, saying in the same whispering tone, "Grumley set me here to watch for you. There's another of us out t'other end of Horslydown—and so we was sure not to miss you somehow. Grumley says the thing can't be done to-night, even if so be the Magsman *is* there—'cause the place is too full. He must see you at the office in Bow Street in the morning."

"Very good," answered Page. "I have settled everything—and it's much better to put it off till to-morrow. The Magsman will then be sure to fall into our hands."

"That's all right," observed the officer. "We was afraid you'd be lurking about if you didn't meet any of us at once—and p'rhaps some of them prigs would have seen you. That's why we stayed to keep a look-out for you."

"Thank'ee for your kindness," responded Page. "I was indeed wondering why I didn't hear or see anything of you. Good night."

"Good night, sir," answered the constable;—and they separated, the commercial traveller continuing his way along Pickled Herring Street.

But the whole of this colloquy was overheard by the spy set to dog Page's footsteps; and five minutes afterwards every syllable was duly reported to those whom it concerned at the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. HARLEY.

We must now return to Paradise Villas.

Several hours had elapsed since the departure of Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith, with their domestics, in the travelling-carriage; and the sisters were just sitting down to the afternoon repast in the back-parlour, when a hackney-coach drove up to the door. A middle-aged man, dressed in black, with a white neckcloth, and having the appearance of a valet, or "gentleman's gentleman," hastily alighted; and while he quietly traversed the little garden and gave a loud knock at the door, the coachman took two or three small hampers out of the vehicle.

The char-woman having answered the summons, the individual in black requested to speak to Miss Clarendon; and he was accordingly shown into the front-parlour, where the sisters immediately joined him.

"I have the honour to be in the service of Mr. Harley, ladies," said the valet, with a low bow and speaking in a tone of deep respect. "My master has directed me to call in order to apologise for his abrupt departure the evening before last, but the cause of which he will satisfactorily explain when next he has the pleasure of seeing you. He has likewise made me the bearer of some game and hot-house fruit, which he hopes you will condescend to accept; and, lastly, he has desired me to intimate that if you are likely to be perfectly disengaged this evening, he will do himself the honour of waiting upon you for an hour, in order to give those explanations to which I have alluded."

"You will have the kindness to give our respectful compliments to Mr. Harley," said Octavia, whose heart palpitated with a joy till then unknown,—"and assure him that although we accept his handsome present through proper courtesy, we are nevertheless grieved that he should have endeavoured to make any return for such trifling hospitality as we were enabled to afford him. We are not aware of any engagement for this evening; but at the same time we must beg you to observe to Mr. Harley that it is quite unnecessary for him to take the trouble of calling merely for the purpose of explaining the motive of his sudden departure the other night."

"Your message, Miss Clarendon, shall be duly delivered," said the valet, with another low bow. "My master instructed me to inquire after the ladies who met with the accident in their travelling-barouche. He hopes——"

"They were fortunate enough to escape without injury," observed Octavia; "and they are no longer beneath our roof."

"Pardon me for having so long intruded upon you, Miss Clarendon," said the valet; and, with another obeisance, he took his departure.

The hampers which he brought with him, had been deposited by the hackney-coachman in the passage during the interval occupied by the preceding colloquy; and the sisters now proceeded to examine them. There was a quantity of the finest forced fruit, which could not have been purchased in Covent Garden Market for less than twenty guineas;—and there were two brace of pheasants and a couple of hares.

The sisters were much gratified by the delicate attention exhibited by Mr. Harley; and Octavia's heart smote her for having so emphatically denounced his conduct in quitting them with such abruptness on the night when they first formed his acquaintance. She even looked forward with secret pleasure to his promised visit for the evening; but she did not suffer this sentiment to become known to her sister.

At about five o'clock Octavia proposed that they

should make such improvements to their toilette as she alleged to be suitable for the reception of a guest who was evidently accustomed to move in the best society; and Pauline, though more indifferent in the matter than her sister, readily assented. They accordingly assumed their best apparel: and they did not forget to adorn themselves with the jewellery which they had received from Mrs. Smith.

Never had either Octavia or Pauline appeared to greater advantage than on the present occasion. The corsage of their gowns being very low, according to the fashion of the time, would have left their white and gracefully sloping shoulders completely uncovered, had not the luxuriant curls showered down upon them—wantoning also over the rich contours that shaped their firm, plump, and well-rounded busts.

The glance of an experienced eye would have however shown that Octavia had devoted more care than Pauline to her toilette. The younger sister was satisfied when the mirror told her that she looked as well as ever she did in her best apparel: but Octavia had studied to excel on this special occasion. Never had she bestowed so much pains upon that glorious auburn hair which in its warm and sunny hues seemed to indicate the ardent nature of her temperament: never had she stood so long before the glass to admire those deep blue eyes which now seemed melting with voluptuous languor;—and never had she before thought of observing which smiles imparted the sweetest expression to her moist red lips, or set off her brilliant teeth to the greatest advantage. She felt proud and happy in the consciousness of transcendent loveliness; and as she cast a slow, lingering look over her entire form as it was reflected in the long mirror, her cheeks flushed with exultation and her neck arched superbly as if in anticipation of some triumph which her charms were destined to achieve.

And now behold the two sisters seated in the front parlour, one on either side of the cheerful fire that blazes in the grate. The curtains are drawn over the window—the lamp diffuses a softly golden lustre throughout the small but comfortable room—and the table is spread with the tea-things, which give an air of such perfect domesticity to the scene that a prince, had he been present, would have gladly accepted the invitation of those beautiful girls to join them in the humble meal.

Pauline was whiling away the time with a romance: Octavia was absorbed in her reflections. These were however by no means disagreeable: for, with the sanguine disposition characteristic of her age and her inexperience, she had fallen into a train of thought which gradually led her on to a shadowing forth of her own views of happiness—that delightful castle-building upon the golden sands of the future!

The expected coming of Mr. Harley had led her to reflect upon his handsome person—the easy elegance of his address—the nobility of his air—his melodious yet manly voice—the irresistible sweetness of his smile—and the fascinating style of his conversation. Then she remembered that he had declared himself to be unmarried—and an involuntary sigh stole upward from her bosom. She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks and her very ears tingling with the blushful glow; and though she started for a moment and was even vexed with herself for having allowed the sigh to follow the reminiscence, yet at the next instant she plunged again into a delicious reverie, wherein her girlish bashfulness gave way to a yielding softness and a dreamy voluptuousness.

Suddenly a loud knock at the front-door startled Pauline from her book and Octavia from her meditations; and the latter awoke to what appeared to be a guilty consciousness of having made him who was now about to enter, the hero of her thoughts. Again did the blood rush to her cheeks; and the warm glow, not having had time to ebb away ere Mr. Harley was ushered into the room, overspread her lovely countenance once more with a renewed suffusion.

Mr. Harley pressed Pauline's hand with a friendly cordiality: but so enraptured was he by the blushing and voluptuous charms of Octavia, that he carried *her* hand hastily to his lips and imprinted upon it a fervent kiss. So sudden was this movement that Octavia had not time to resist, even if she had possessed the inclination; and so rapidly was it accomplished, that Pauline did not observe it. A tide of happiness appeared to rush in to the elder sister's soul: it seemed to her as if she had unexpectedly and all in a moment experienced the realization of a delicious dream;—and indescribable sensations of bliss came over her like a warm glow, as if she had just quaffed a goblet of champagne.

Mr. Harley was a thorough man of the world, and deeply versed in all the mysteries and intricacies of the human heart. But especially was he an able anatomist of the female mind, which he could dissect and comprehend in an instant. The emotions experienced by Octavia were not lost upon him: he perceived and deciphered them almost as soon as they had sprung into existence;—and he saw in a moment that he was not indifferent to her. She had not withdrawn her hand—she had uttered no ejaculation when he pressed it to his lips—nor had she resented his conduct. The blush that suffused her cheeks, was indicative of a deep and burning joy—and not an evidence of indignation;—and Mr. Harley knew by the melting voluptuousness which beamed in her eyes, and by the profound heaving of her swelling bosom, and the sympathetic thrill which shot through every vein in her fair hand during the few seconds that he held it in his grasp,—by all these symptoms was he assured that he had only to demand the love of Octavia Clarendon in order to obtain it.

"Perceiving the preparations which had been made on the table, Mr. Harley declared that if there were one thing that he longed for more than another in the shape of refreshment at that moment, it was a cup of tea; and this assurance induced Pauline to bustle about all the more actively, while the guest seated himself next to Octavia.

"We have to thank you, Mr. Harley," said this, young lady, her bosom palpitating with the subsiding of her emotions, even as the swell remains on the surface of the ocean after the storm has passed, —"we have to thank you for the handsome present you sent us this afternoon——"

"A mere trifle—not worthy of your acceptance," interrupted the visitor; "but it consisted of the only things I could heap together in a hurry, for the purpose of proving that you were not absent from my thoughts—as *you*, indeed, never can be," he added in a low and hasty whisper aside to Octavia, and with strong emphasis on the pronoun. "But I promised you certain explanations," he continued almost immediately, perceiving that the elder sister's con-

fusion was such as to be likely to attract the notice of Pauline: "at least, I hope that my valet Edwards did not omit to mention the fact that I knew an apology to be necessary for my abrupt, unaccountable, and apparently rude departure the night before last."

"Your domestic obeyed your orders with exactitude, Mr. Harley," said Octavia, now recovering her self-possession: "but we require no explanation—being well aware," she added, timidly, "that you are incapable of acting with intentional rudeness."

"A thousand thanks, Miss Clarendon—*dear* Miss Clarendon—for your kind opinion of me," exclaimed Mr. Harley, fixing upon her a look of indescribable tenderness, which she involuntarily returned—for she was not mistress of her actions, much less of her emotions. "I *must*, however, in justice to myself as well as from respect to you, explain the reasons of my precipitate disappearance. But first permit me to ask whether those ladies happened to mention to you who they were ——"

"One was a Mrs. Mordaunt—and the other a Mrs. Smith," answered Pauline: "but Octavia and I had our suspicions on that head," she added, archly.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Harley, darting a keen and searching look upon the younger sister: "and what might those suspicions be, Miss Pauline?"

"Oh! we thought it very probable that they might be great ladies travelling *incognito*," returned the laughing girl, as she desisted for a moment from her occupation of pouring out the tea.

"Not unlikely," observed Mr. Harley, with a peculiar dryness of manner which might have been even taken for covert satire had the sisters been experienced enough thus to comprehend it: then, instantly resuming his usual bland, affable, and peculiarly gentlemanly tone and deportment, he said, "I presume that Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt did not make any allusion to me?"

"None," replied Pauline. "But did you happen to know those ladies, then? I should scarcely think so—or else you would not have run away so ungallantly," added the young maiden in a playful manner.

"Ah! now you remind me that I have yet to give you a certain explanation," said Mr. Harley: "and I will delay it no longer. The truth is, then, that in those ladies belonging to the broken chariot, I recognised near relatives of the ungrateful friend who had placed me in a temporary embarrassment; and so irritated became my feelings at the time that I knew not what I did. Acting without the least forethought, and only in obedience to the impulse of the moment, I hurried away in order to avoid the necessity of even exchanging a word with those whose presence awoke such painful reminiscences."

"Then you were acquainted with the two ladies?" said Octavia; "and you can inform us whether they gave their real names, or whether the romantic notion of my sister Pauline be correct?"

"Yes—dear Miss Clarendon—they did not deceive you in respect to their names," answered Mr. Harley: "as who indeed would deceive *you* in anything?" he added, sinking his voice to the lowest whisper and availing himself of the opportunity afforded by Pauline's turning aside for the moment to cut up a cake.

The tea was now served round—and not only did Mr. Harley force himself to swallow two cups of a beverage which he in reality detested, but also managed to eat a slice of cake though he knew it would disagree with him. But he was well aware of the immense strides he should thus make in the good graces of these artless, frank, and good-natured girls by adapting himself familiarly to their comparatively homely habits; and thus by the time that the old char-woman was summoned to clear the table, he had as it were insinuated himself into a position of as friendly an intimacy as if they had known him for a dozen years.

But then his manners were so fascinating—his conversation so delightful—and his attentions so constant, and yet so delicate. Without an effort and also without affectation, he displayed a perfect acquaintance with the literature of the country—made striking comments upon the passing events of the day—and related several amusing anecdotes relative to those great men of the age whose names were in every body's mouth;—then, with an easy and apparently quite natural transition, he slided glibly into a critique upon the last new dramas produced at the national theatres, and by a few rapid remarks on the musical talent in vogue at the time, proved his exquisite taste and delicate perception in respect to the divine art.

In this manner the time passed rapidly away: minutes flew by with silent wings, until they accumulated into hours; and when the clock struck ten, Pauline quitted the room in order to give directions for supper.

The moment Octavia found herself alone with Mr. Harley, a species of tremor came over her—not of pain, nor yet altogether of pleasure,—but a strange commingling of the two, such as when hope and fear retain the soul in the excitement of suspense.

"Oh! what happiness have I experienced this evening!" exclaimed Harley, turning towards the blushing, trembling maiden, and bending upon her a look full of the most melting fondness. "The few hours that I have passed with you, lovely Octavia, have appeared to me an elysian felicity—an interval so full of heavenly bliss, that it were worth while to give the ten best years of one's existence to enjoy it again! Yes, adorable girl," he continued, his tone becoming more fervent and his manner more impassioned,—"I loved you the first moment that I beheld you—and ever since you have not once been absent from my thoughts! I have cherished your image—I shall ever cherish it," he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips in rapture.

"Mr. Harley—I implore you—oh! I conjure you—nay, I command you — release me," faltered Octavia, a deeper blush suffusing her countenance while her eyes appeared to swim in a liquid langour and her bosom palpitated with a variety of conflicting emotions, joy and fear preponderating.

"Nay—do not seek to deprive me of this fair hand, Octavia!" said Mr. Harley, throwing himself on his knees before her, and gluing his lips to the hand which he still retained in his own and which the bewildered girl exerted herself but feebly to withdraw "do not dash away the cup of happiness and hope which you have raised to my lips! I love you, Octavia—I adore you,—for you are all that is beautiful, and good, and excellent to be beloved! And believe me, sweet girl, when I take heaven to witness that never until now have I known what true love is.

—never until I saw you did I experience the exquisite bliss that attends on that passion! Look upon me, Octavia—do not avert your eyes," he continued, with all the winning eloquence of his seductive tongue: "turn upon me those glances that flash like lightning through my veins—let me contemplate my own soul speaking in your eloquent orbs—suffer me to read the delightful language of hope in the glorious beauty of your looks!"

Bewildered and rejoicing—with indefinable feelings of fear mingling with a burning satisfaction and a thrilling exultation,—partly succumbing to an influence which she could not control, and partly yielding to the impulse of her inclinations,—Octavia bent down her head until her long, glossy auburn tresses showered over the shoulders of Harley, as he knelt at her feet—and her polished, warm forehead came in contact with his fine and open, but flushed and heated brow.

The touch of that charming creature's throbbing temples against his own, and the sweeping of her glorious hair across his cheeks,—the fanning of his countenance with her fragrant breath, and the more than mere glimpse which her attitude as she leant over him enabled his eyes to catch of the plump, firm, and swelling bosom that heaved with its virgin passion,—all this inflamed the licentious Harley to a degree bordering on a delirium of the senses, while his blood ran like a lava-stream through his veins.

Starting from his suppliant posture, he threw his arms around the yielding maiden—pressed her to his bosom—kissed her splendid forehead, her closing eyes, her burning cheeks, and her moist red lips,—then murmured words of impassioned ardour and vows of eternal love,—and then imprinted innumerable kisses again on her glowing features.

At length extricating herself from his embrace, and hurriedly smoothing her dress and arranging her disordered hair, she turned upon him a look of mingled tenderness and reproach: but ere she had time to give utterance to a syllable of remonstrance, Harley's lips were again glued to her's with such impassioned ardour that he almost seemed to suck in the very fragrance of her breath.

"Release me—for God's sake, let me go!" she murmured, once more extricating herself from his embrace: "my sister will return in a moment——"

"And I will tell her that I love—that I adore you, charming Octavia!" interrupted Harley, who appeared to be maddened with excitement.

"No—no—not yet!" said Octavia, yielding to him her hand, and holding down her blushing countenance. "Consider, Mr. Harley——"

"Call me by my Christian name, dearest,—call me George," he exclaimed, passing his arm round her waist and drawing her gently towards him, until his cheek rested upon the glossy surface of her radiant hair.

"Consider then, George," she proceeded, in a low, tremulous, yet tender tone, which seemed like the sound of a silver bell oscillating in a strong breeze,—"consider that we have known each other for so short a time—that my father is absent——"

"Well, then, my angel, we will for the present conceal our love," said Harley. "But *do* you—*can* you love me? Oh! now upon your reply all my happiness reposes!"

"And were I to answer in the affirmative," said the rejoicing, exulting, but trembling girl, "you would deem me bold—forward—rash—inconsiderate——"

"Oh! no—no! I can never entertain a sentiment injurious to you, my beloved Octavia!" interrupted George Harley: then, drawing her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he said, "Tell me, therefore, that you *do* love me—or at least assure me that I am not indifferent to you! Look up, my angel—turn your heavenly countenance towards me—and now let me behold those delicious lips frame the delightful words, '*I love thee!*'"

"Oh! who can resist your winning eloquence!" murmured Octavia, in whose veins the warm blood circulated like lightning, while her beauteous eyes expressed all the tenderness of an engrossing passion: then, after a few moments' pause, she flung herself upon Harley's bosom, exclaiming, "Yes, George—I love thee!"

Again did the enraptured Harley imprint a thousand kisses upon her flushed and glowing countenance: again and again did he clasp her to his breast—and while his lips were glued to her's, he could feel her bosom throbbing against his chest like the undulations of a mighty tide ebbing to and fro. Octavia was lost as it were in a new world of ineffable bliss: she felt like one who has suddenly passed from the monotony of a well-known and long familiar clime into a glorious land where streams are most pearly, foliage most green, flowers most beautiful, fruits most luscious, and the air most fragrant;—and, forgetful of the past as well as reckless of the future, she abandoned herself to all the ecstacy, the delirium, and the glow of a new and transcendently blissful existence. It was a full sensation of love that the beauteous maiden thus experienced; and it was a species of poetic sensuousness that surrounded her as with a halo—bathing the cheeks in crimson hues and pouring a flood of light into the swimming eyes!

While thus locked in Harley's fond embrace, Octavia thought not of her sister—nor of the danger of being discovered in that position—nor of anything save the elysian bliss which she derived from the new sentiments that animated her and the paradise which had thus been opened to her imagination's enjoyment: and had opportunity served—had there been no fear of the sudden return of Pauline—Harley would have found her then and there an easy conquest—an unresisting victim to the insatiable licentiousness of his nature.

But though he himself was excited almost to delirium by the contact of that lovely creature whose cheek reposed against his own, whose shiuing hair wantoned all over his shoulders, and whose glowing bosom heaved against his breast,—yet was he enabled to command a certain amount of presence of mind;—and gently separating from the confiding, loving girl, he said, "This is a heavenly dream of happiness in which all worldly thoughts are absorbed! But we must exercise prudence, my angel—and 'tis now for *me* to remind you that Pauline will soon return. Tell me, sweetest girl, can you possibly find an excuse to go out alone for an hour or two to-morrow evening? Nay—start not—I have so many things to tell you—so much to say to you, my beloved Octavia!"

"Oh! do not ask me to act with such duplicity towards my sister!" murmured the young lady, again settling her disordered dress and re-arranging her luxuriant hair.

"'Twas you yourself, my charmer, who implored me not to proclaim my love in the presence of Pauline," said Harley. "But if you have no confidence in me, Octavia—if you fancy for a moment that I would counsel you in any way to your own injury or disgrace," he added, his tone suddenly assuming a hauteur mingled with reproach,—"then am I unworthy of your affection!"

"Oh! now you are angry with me, George," she faltered, while tears started forth upon her long dark lashes.

"No—no, my adored girl—I cannot be angry with you," exclaimed Harley, kissing away her tears. "Only promise that you will meet me to-morrow evening——"

"I will," murmured Octavia, in a tone that was scarcely audible.

"Thanks, dearest—a thousand thanks," returned Harley; and the joyousness of his tone and manner excited such ineffable pleasure in the bosom of Octavia, as to stifle the momentary remorse which had stricken her with a sudden pang when her lips breathed an assent to her lover's prayer. "To-morrow evening, then, my beloved one, we shall meet again!" he continued, in his tenderest and most seductive tones. "The place of appointment shall be at the very respectable and fashionable millinery establishment of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall. At six o clock I shall be there, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the most lovely and best-beloved of women. Tell me, then, Octavia—tell me that I shall not experience disappointment."

The too-confiding girl breathed the required promise; and Harley, with difficulty veiling the triumphant feelings which animated him, now besought her to compose herself in such a manner that Pauline might not suspect the tender understanding which existed between them. This was by no means an easy task for Octavia to achieve, so full of ecstatic feelings was her soul. But love is often wonderfully suggestive of what may be termed a venial duplicity; and the young lady accordingly succeeded in concealing the ardour of her passion beneath a studied reserve—so that the evening passed away without affording the slightest ground for exciting a suspicion on Pauline's part.

Mr. Harley partook of the supper which had been prepared; and during the meal his conversation grew more animated, sparkling, and attractive than ever. Octavia was charmed and fascinated—and there were moments when she could have thrown off her reserve, started from her seat, and flung her arms about his neck, claiming him as her lover in the presence of Pauline: but, though it was painful to restrain her feelings beneath the iron control of prudence, she nevertheless succeeded in thus exercising a severe domination over them. On the other hand, Pauline was gay, sprightly, and in excellent spirits; but while she admired Mr. Harley's brilliant qualifications, and even felt proud of possessing such an acquaintance, she shared not in the softer and more tender feelings that had acquired such empire over her more yielding, sensitive, and impassioned sister.

It was nearly midnight when Mr. Harley rose to take his leave; and Octavia accompanied him as far as the garden-gate.

"You will not forget your promise for to-morrow evening, my angel?" he whispered, as he hastily but fervently pressed her hand to his lips.

"No!" she murmured in a scarcely audible tone;—and they separated—Harley departing to gloat in anticipation over the conquest which he hoped full soon to achieve—and Octavia returning into the villa, to dream of the man who had obtained such empire over her soul!

CHAPTER X.

THE KINCHIN-KEN.—THE TABLES TURNED.

In the time of which we are writing, *Grub Street* was the un-euphonious and repulsive appellation of that long, narrow, and dirty lane in the Cripplegate district, which now bears the name of *Milton Street*. At the present day the features of that thoroughfare are none of the most inviting: but at the close of the eighteenth century, the aspect of the place was disgusting and villanous in the extreme. There was not a vestige of pavement; and the ground was so uneven and rugged, that few vehicles ever ventured that way—for in the fine weather they stood a chance of being overturned by the mounds of concrete dirt that dotted the lane, and in the rainy seasons the wheels were sure to sink into deep ruts.

The houses were of the most miserable description—the shops of the poorest kind. Every dwelling harboured numerous distinct families;—and poverty forced the poor artizan into a close neighbourhood with the avowed thief. The result, in such cases, too often was that the former instead of bringing the latter within the sphere of a commendable industry, became infected with the poison of demoralisation, and in the desperation produced by failure of work, threw himself into the arms of the villain who promised a rich harvest with little trouble in the reaping. Vice and depravity accordingly spread like a pestilence in that locality; and as the first words which infants were taught to lisp were oaths and imprecation, so the last which they uttered in their manhood were too frequently the death-prayer on the gallows!

And who can wonder if Grub Street and its neighbourhood had become a noted academy for the training of thieves,—a seminary whence the ranks of vice, demoralisation, and crime recruited themselves from day to day,—a hideous school of infamy where the preceptors were the wretched children's own parents?—who can wonder, we again ask, if Newgate, which was so ominously handy, had no fear of finding its felons' wards and its condemned cells deserted, so long as the low lodging-houses, the boozing-kens, the brothels, the receivers' and fences' shops, and all the other dens of iniquity in which Grub Street abounded, flourished in all their fœtid and rank luxuriance—the noxious weeds of the social system.

Reader, take the map of the Great Metropolis—and with "The Mysteries of London" by your side for ready reference, circle with a dark line, either with pen or pencil, each and every loathsome district or neighbourhood which you will find described in the two Series of that work or in the one which you are now perusing. Then calculate the proportion which the haunts of crime and the skulking-places of poverty bear to the localities where comfort is found or where opulence and splendour reign. The result will prove that two-thirds of the

mighty Babylon are covered with a plague-mist of demoralisation, misery, ignorance, wretchedness, squalor, and crime. And yet a thousand towers, pinnacles, and spires point up to heaven, and indicate the houses of God and the temples of worship. Oh! what have the myriad fat and bloated pastors done for the population that swarms in those frightful neighbourhoods?—who can trace in those scenes of depravity the influence of the pulpit, or in those sinks of destitution the beneficence of paternal Government? If a missionary of Religion be ever encountered in such places, be well assured that he belongs not to the Established Church, which is so extravagantly paid by compulsion, but to the sphere of Dissent, which is sustained by voluntary contributions. And, again, if the votary of Education be seen amongst the swarming regions of the poor, rest assured that he is no paid emissary of a National System of Instruction, but a philanthropist who seeks to impart knowledge on an eleemosynary principle!

At the time of which we are writing, there were numerous public-houses and boozing-kens of the vilest description in Grub Street: but none was more notorious, with an evil renown, than a certain flash crib denominated the *Kinchin-Ken*.* As its name implied, it was a resort for juveniles of both sexes,—boy-thieves and prostitutes of the most tender age; and no phase of human depravity was exhibited in more appalling hues even at the Beggar's Staff than at the sink of profligacy of which we are speaking.

Let the reader picture to himself a small room, filled with rude tables and ruder forms,—then, an inner-chamber of smaller dimensions still, and with the door of communication removed so as to afford uninterrupted egress and ingress between the two,—the ceilings blackened with smoke, and the walls stained with innumerable spots of grease,—and about three dozen boys and girls enjoying themselves in a variety of ways by the light of two or three pitiful candles. The atmosphere of the den was rendered pestiferous with the odour of strong onions, the smell of tobacco, and the fœtid exhalations from the filthy garments and persons of the profligate horde.

The ages of the inmates of these rooms averaged from ten to sixteen; and the boys all belonged to an organisation having a captain at its head, and bearing the name of the *Kinchin-Prigs*.† This chief was present on the occasion which we are now especially describing. He was lolling on a form, with a short pipe in his mouth, his right arm round the waist of a dirty drab of a girl who was his avowed mistress, and his left hand grasping a chairman's hammer which he rapped energetically upon the table whenever he considered the noise to be growing too clamorous. Great deference was paid to the Kinchin-Grand, as this youth of sixteen was denominated;—and certainly if the most hang-dog countenance ever seen, uniting in all its lineaments every sign of dissipation with inveterate profligacy, low cunning, and a certain expression of villanous shrewdness,—if such were the qualifications necessary for the chief of this pestiferous society, then did the Kinchin-Grand well deserve the "bad eminence" to which he had risen.

We may as well observe that his paramour was about his own age: her face was pale and sickly with the vicious courses which she led, though her form was bloated and precociously matured from the same cause;—and her features indicated a compound of low cunning and brazen assurance. She was known amongst her associates as *Shickster Sal**—the titular portion of the name being acquired from the fact that this wretched young girl had been well and even tenderly brought up until about the age of twelve, when she was enticed away from her home and parents by some vile old woman; and ever since she had clung to the life of dissipation and profligacy which we now find her pursuing.

It wanted about twenty minutes to the midnight hour, when Mr. Page, dressed in the shabbiest suit of clothes which the porter at Hodson and Morley's had to lend him, and with his face and hands purposely smeared over with dirt, entered the Kinchin-Ken. But scarcely had he reached the threshold of the door opening into the front room, when the scene that burst upon his sight produced such a poignant sensation of loathing, that he stood for a few moments almost motionless with mingled surprise, horror, and disgust. For simultaneously as his eyes were seared by the spectacle of half-naked girls and wretched boys wrapped in rags, all engaged in a hideous orgie—his ears were assailed by the jabber of many tongues, all enunciating language of the most obscene, filthy, and profane description. In fact, the Beggar's Staff was a perfect paradise compared with this pandemonium that now broke upon his view; and the society he had seen at the former place appeared angels of light in contrast with the juvenile specimens of brutalized humanity that were huddled together in the Kinchin-Ken.

"Oh! I say, Bill—here's a feller a-comin' whose face is quite unbeknown," exclaimed one of the thieves, catching sight of Mr. Page: "we'll make him stand a pot or two, or I'm jiggered! Come in, old feller—don't stand on nothink like ceremony—we'll make room for yer."

Page, recovering his self-possession, instantly accepted the invitation thus blurted forth at the top of a voice which sounded like an asthmatic bag-pipe; and immediately three or four little wretches of boys and girls made a place for him at their table—giggling heartily amongst themselves while he was taking his seat, as if it were excellent fun.

"Now then, old feller, wot'll yer stand?" demanded the youth who had already addressed him. "Our lush is heavy vet, yer see," he continued, turning a pewter pot upside down to prove that it was empty.

"I shall be very glad to stand a few quarts of beer for this good company," said Page, throwing into his manner and voice as much coarseness as he could, and at the same time flinging two or three shillings down upon the table.

"Brayvo!" ejaculated several voices: "brayvo—bray-ay-vo—oh!" shouted the rest, taking up the chorus; and when order was restored by the rapping of the Kinchin-Grand's hammer upon the table, the landlord of the place made his appearance from some back premises.

"Well—what is it now?" demanded that individual, who was a short, thin, dirty old man, with a very wrinkled and cadaverous countenance and surly looks.

"Here's a feller as is game to stand heavy vet for

* Literally "Children's-house." † Children-Thieves.

* *Shickster* means "Lady."

us all," responded the Kinchin-Grand; "so look alive, Old Bloak, and bring in the lush."

The landlord's features underwent a species of grim relaxation as he received the silver from Page's hand: but before he departed to execute the commission, he sounded each coin on the table:—then, quite satisfied with the result of a process which was doubtless very necessary in such an establishment, he used all possible despatch to supply the amount of malt liquor ordered.

The health of the individual who had provided this treat was now proposed by the Kinchin-Grand in a speech stuffed so full of slang terms and flash expressions that had Mr. Page been at a Chinese banquet, with a Mandarin holding forth in his own language at the head of the table, the whole affair would have proved equally intelligible. However, the commercial traveller's health was drunk with uproarious glee; and almost immediately after this ceremony was performed, the Magsman entered the room.

The appearance of that formidable personage was the signal for fresh outbursts of rejoicing. The boys looked upon him as affording the brightest example that could possibly be offered to their contemplation,—a sort of thieves' cynosure, combining all the admirable qualities of Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard, and other individuals noted in the Newgate calendar,—a hero in fine, the mere mention of whose name was sufficient to excite the fires of emulation in every breast. On the other hand, the girls surveyed him with profound deference and respect; and had King George III entered the place at that moment, the young prostitutes would not have thought half so much of the company of that monarch as of the presence of one whose marvellous deeds were calculated, if recorded in print, to invest the annals of crime with the interest of romance.

The Magsman shook hands with the Kinchin-Grand and Shickster Sal, and then bestowed the same mark of condescension upon Page. He likewise dispensed a few shillings in regaling the juvenile horde; and, having apologised for leaving the delectable company in such haste, he took his departure with the commercial traveller.

"Well—what do you think of that scene?" said the Magsman to his companion, when they had gained the street, along which they proceeded in the direction of Cripplegate.

"I could not have believed that such places existed in the heart of a city which boasts its wealth, its civilisation, and its philanthropy," answered Page, speaking with an emphasis congenial to his feelings.

"Ah! there are more extraordinary things than that to be seen in London, I can assure you," returned the Magsman; "and may be you'll become acquainted with them some day or another. Lord! what a tale I could tell if I was examined before a Committee of the House of Commons, as they call it! Talk of a man being a Prime Minister who knows nothing—positively nothing—of the misery, poverty, and wretchedness which the working-classes endure: it is ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, indeed!" repeated Page.

At this moment they had reached the end of the lane which joins Fore Street; and as there was a hackney coach blocking up the way, Page stepped behind the Magsman to let him proceed first, as only one person could pass by at a time. But just as Page was picking his way between the vehicle and the buildings on his right, the Magsman turned suddenly back—seized him violently round the waist with both arms—and hurled him completely into the hackney-coach, the door of which was wide open at the moment. A man and a woman inside the vehicle, caught the commercial traveller as he was thus tossed in upon them; and while a gag was slipped into his mouth by one of these individuals, his eyes were blindfolded by the other.

The Magsman instantly leapt in, after the performance of this feat; and the hackney-coach drove rapidly away.

Page now heard the windows drawn up; and almost at the same time, the Magsman's voice sounded in his ears, saying, "We don't want to suffocate you, old fellow: and so the gag shall be taken out of your mouth. But recollect, that if you venture to speak a word even too loud—much less attempt a cry—you're a dead man. Now then, Lizzy, let his clapper wag again."

The Gallows' Widow removed the gag in obedience to this command; and page now breathed freely in one sense, though not in another—for an awful consternation was upon him, and death appeared to stare him in the face.

"You see, my ben-cull," resumed the Magsman, after a pause, and speaking in a cool, deliberate tone, "the fact is that you're caught in your own net. The tables are turned upon you—and you must now take the consequences."

"Will you murder me?" asked Page, with a hollow groan.

"Not such a fool as that," responded the Magsman. "Your carcase would not be even worth the price of dog's-meat for the same weight in horse-flesh: whereas you may manage to raise five hundred guineas for your ransom."

"Five hundred guineas!" ejaculated the miserable commercial traveller, now bitterly repenting his folly in entering into this enterprise against the formidable enemies who had not only baffled him but also got him completely in their power.

"Well, ain't it enough?" growled a voice, which Page immediately recognised to be that of the Big Beggarman.

The commercial traveller groaned again, but made no reply; and throwing himself back in the vehicle, he gave way to his melancholy reflections.

The Gallows' Widow, the Magsman, and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff now proceeded to chat familiarly amongst themselves; and the coach rolled rapidly along, the driver frequently whipping his horses to increase their speed.

Upwards of three quarters of an hour thus passed; and at length the vehicle stopped. Page was immediately compelled to alight: and he was conducted between the Magsman and the Big Beggarman along a place which he took to be a court or alley,—for the mere fact of being blindfolded sharpened his perception relative to the nature of the echoes raised by the trampling of feet and the sounds of voices.

"Hold your tongue, mind," said the Magsman as they thus proceeded onward: "or it will be the worse for you, depend upon it."

"The butt-end of a horse-pistol is a nasty thing coming across one's brains," added the Beggarman.

The commercial traveller remained silent accordingly; and in a few minutes he was led up two or

three steps into a house, the door of which had been previously opened in obedience to the summons of the Gallows' Widow who had gone on in front for the purpose.

Along a boarded passage Page was now conducted—then down a flight of steep stone steps, at the bottom of which he heard the Gallows' Widow removing the bolts and chain of a door. This process caused a few moments' delay; and the instant the door swung round upon its grating hinges, a voice, apparently coming from the bowels of the earth, exclaimed, "Fiends! will you give me my liberty?"

"Not till the conditions are complied with, my bencull," responded the Magsman. "But we've brought you a companion—and you ought at least to thank us for *that*."

"Miscreants!" ejaculated the voice, in a tone of deep, concentrated rage.

At the same moment the Big Beggarman pushed the commercial traveller forward into the cellar or dungeon—and the door was immediately closed with violence. Then there was the din caused by replacing the chain and by shooting the massive bolts into their sockets; and that ominous noise was followed by the sounds of retreating footsteps up the stairs.

Page remained standing motionless—breathless—stupified, until all was silent: then, tearing off the bandage from his eyes, but finding himself in total darkness, he sank down upon the damp earth with an ejaculation of indescribable misery.

"Who are you, unhappy man, that have thus been brought hither to share with me the horrors of this deu?" asked the voice which he had before heard.

"I am indeed an unhappy man!" cried Page, clutching his hair on each side of his head with his two hands and tearing it with frantic violence.

"Not more unhappy than I," responded his companion, bitterly. "Oh! my God! when I reflect

upon all the misfortunes which have fallen upon my devoted head, I feel as if I were going mad—mad!"

"Then accident has brought together the two most unhappy beings in existence," said the commercial traveller. "But let us know each other better. My name is Page—and I am, or *was*, in the service of Hodson and Morley, Wood Street."

"And my name is Sir Richard Stamford," was the rejoinder.

CHAPTER XI.

SIR RICHARD STAMFORD.

MR. PAGE literally bounded from the damp floor of the dungeon as this name fell upon his ears: and with straining eyes he endeavoured to pierce through the intense darkness of the place in order to obtain a glimpse of the baronet's countenance. But the night that prevailed there, was of that profound blackness which, like the Egyptian plague, could be almost felt!

"Sir Richard Stamford!" repeated the commercial traveller, in a tone of such mingled amazement and horror that it startled the unhappy gentleman whose name had produced so unaccountable an effect.

"Yes—I am indeed the individual whom I proclaim myself to be," answered the baronet. "But is it possible that my misfortunes are known to you?"

"Misfortunes!" ejaculated the commercial traveller, with a cold shudder.

"Misfortunes of an unparalleled description," returned Sir Richard Stamford, in a tone of great bitterness. "But although I cannot see your countenance, there is something in your voice and manner which denotes mystery or misapprehension. Tell me, I conjure you, what you have heard concerning me—what the world knows or says regarding the terrible events at Stamford Manor—and what has become of those villains Ramsey and Martin?"

"You do indeed surprise me!" exclaimed Page. "But before we continue the discourse on those topics, permit me to inform you that my present deplorable incarceration here is all more or less owing to you."

"To me!" cried the baronet, his bewilderment increasing.

"Yes—to you," answered Page, in an impetuous and irritated tone. "If I had not meddled in your affairs, I never should have encountered the miscreant who has locked me up in this accursed place. But it was all through meeting you the night before last at the George and Blue Boar in Holborn—and then chasing you in a hackney-coach till you disappeared in the Edgeware Road——"

"Is it possible that these wretches can have given me a madman as a companion?" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, in a voice too full of anguish to permit the slightest doubt as to his sincerity, or to allow the least suspicion that he was wilfully affecting not to understand the allusions and meaning of the commercial traveller.

"I see that we are playing at cross-purposes somehow or another," said Page: "but with a little patience we may soon get at the truth. In the first place, however, I can assure you that I am no lunatic—although it is very possible that I shall become one shortly, if my employers don't rescue me from this dreadful dungeon."

"You spoke of meeting me the night before last at a tavern in Holborn," observed Sir Richard Stamford, still hesitating to believe in the alleged sanity of his fellow-prisoner, but determined to put him to the test.

"To be sure," cried the commercial traveller. "And I made some civil remark to you: but you turned away as proud as Lucifer, scarcely deigning a reply."

"There is some strange misconception in all this," said the baronet: "for not only was I never in my life at the tavern which you named, but the night you allude to was passed by me in this wretched place."

"And yet you are Sir Richard Stamford?" exclaimed Page, with increasing bewilderment.

"I have already assured you I am that most unhappy and much injured individual," was the mournful response.

"When were you brought here, might I ask?" demanded the commercial traveller. "Let us reckon by dates and days—and then we shall come to the point. The terrible events of Aylesbury took place during the night of Monday the 4th of January."

"And it was immediately after those fatal occurrences that I was seized—thrust into a covered van—gagged—and brought hither," said the baronet. "As nearly as I can reckon, it must have been at about six o'clock in the morning of the 5th that I was plunged into this cell, where I have remained ever since."

"Nevertheless, it was on Tuesday evening, the 5th, that I saw you at the George and Blue Boar," exclaimed the commercial traveller. "I am sure I cannot be wrong," he continued, in a musing tone. "No—it was on the Tuesday evening I chased you as far as the Edgeware Road—on Wednesday evening I went to the Beggar's Staff—and we may call this Thursday night for the sake of being intelligible, although it is by this time two o'clock on Friday morning."

"Then I can assure you once more that I had been for some hours an inmate of this loathsome place, when you imagine that we met in Holborn," said Sir Richard Stamford. "But may I inquire wherefore you chased any individual whom you supposed to be me, as far as the Edgeware Road?"

"To speak candidly," replied Page, "I was induced to plunge headlong into that mad freak by the reward offered for your apprehension."

"Villain! how dare you make a jest of my misfortunes?" exclaimed the baronet, starting up in a state of terrible excitement, and feeling his way towards the commercial traveller.

"Keep off, sir!" cried the latter, retreating into a corner of the cellar. "I did not mean to irritate you—I only spoke the truth!"

"The truth!" repeated Sir Richard Stamford: then, as a sudden idea struck him, he said in a tone of acute anguish, "I begin to see it all! The miscreants Martin and Ramsey have vilified my name—perhaps accused *me* of deeds which it is maddening to contemplate! My good friend," continued the baronet, exerting all his strength to subdue the agonising emotions which raged within him, "pardon me for my warmth—and let us understand each other."

"That is precisely what I most desire," returned

Page: "but I am so bewildered and confused that I know not how to separate and classify my ideas."

"Permit me to take upon myself the part of interrogator," said the baronet. "On what ground has a reward been offered for my apprehension?"

"Shall I tell you?" said the commercial traveller, with some degree of hesitation.

"Yes—speak!" ejaculated Sir Richard. "I am now prepared to hear any calumny that may be alleged against me."

"You are accused of terrible crimes," continued Page.

"And those crimes," said the baronet, with forced composure,—"what are they?"

"Fraud — forgery — murder — and arson," responded Page, enunciating the words slowly and with much hesitation.

"The miscreants!—the calumniators!" ejaculated Sir Richard Stamford; and the commercial traveller could hear that he dashed his hand violently against his brow.

There was then a long interval of profound silence in the dungeon.

At last this pause—so deep, so still—was broken by the baronet himself, whose voice was characterised by that unnatural steadiness, slowness, and yet partial thickness, which are the invariable evidence of powerfully concentrated emotions.

"You shall at once be made acquainted with my sad history," he began; "and it will then remain for you to decide the amount of commiseration which woes and wrongs so great as mine deserve. Moreover, it is probable that you will leave this awful place long before the day of my liberation shall come —for I can now form a tolerably accurate idea of the object my persecutors have in view in requiring of me certain conditions which I have hitherto peremptorily refused to fulfil, and to which I am now more determined than ever not to assent. Should you, therefore, regain your freedom, leaving me still a prisoner here, you will not abandon my cause—you will not fail to invoke the aid of justice in my behalf!"

"Assuredly not!" ejaculated the commercial traveller; and he prepared to listen with attention to the baronet's story.

"I am now in my thirty-seventh year," began Sir Richard; "and until within a few days ago, sorrow and I were almost perfect strangers to each other. 'Tis true that my mother died when I was sixteen—and that my father followed her to the tomb at about the period of my majority; but these were afflictions which occurred in the ordinary course of nature, and could scarcely be termed subjects for repining. On the day that I became twenty-one, I found myself in possession of an estate producing seven thousand a-year; and, leaving it in the charge of a trustworthy individual, I set out upon a long continental tour. I had already visited France, during my minority—and my taste for travelling was encouraged by the remembrance of the six or eight agreeable months I had passed at that period in Paris. On this second occasion I resolved to extend my tour through Germany, into Italy; and the design was carried into effect. My wanderings were prolonged even beyond my original intention; and five years elapsed ere I again set foot in England. During that interval my property had been much improved through the experience, integrity, and agricultural knowledge of my faithful agent: the tenantry were all prosperous, happy, and contented; —and the welcome that greeted me on my arrival at Stamford Manor was of the warmest and most cordial description. All the farmers and peasantry upon the estate were there assembled, with their families, to receive me;—and I well remember how blithe and joyous was the ball which took place on the lawn in the evening. Pardon me if I have paused to dwell upon an incident apparently so trivial in contrast with the sad events that have recently occurred: but even from the depth of this dungeon, a retrospect over those sunny days of my existence is fraught with a consolatory influence."

The baronet ceased for a few minutes—and Page fancied that the sound of a half-stifled sob stole upon his ear through the intense darkness.

"I was now upwards of six-and-twenty," resumed Sir Richard Stamford; "and it was natural that I should think of marriage. My appetite for travelling was satiated; and I longed to settle down into the enjoyment of a sweet domesticity, in the midst of my tenants. Chance threw me in the way of a widow and her beautiful daughter, who lived in great seclusion at Aylesbury: for their circumstances were extremely limited. It were impossible to conceive a lady more amiable than Mrs. Sedley—or a being more enchantingly lovely than Eleanor. That affection may spring up in the heart at first sight, I am well convinced: because from the first moment that I beheld Eleanor Sedley, I loved her. In a short time my passion amounted to a worship—an adoration: it was rather the enthusiasm which is experienced by the youth of eighteen, than the sentiment which ordinarily animates a man of twenty-six. And I was beloved in return—yes, beloved as ardently and as well; and the widow was rejoiced at the bright prospects which now developed themselves on behalf of her darling daughter. We were married after a comparatively short courtship; and Mrs. Sedley took up her residence with us at the Manor, on our return from the honeymoon-visit to a relative of mine in Devonshire. A few years passed away in happiness so unalloyed—so complete, that had I reflected at all I might have felt assured, judging from the mutability of human affairs, that this elysian state was too glorious to last for ever But I had not a care for the present nor a dread for the future and although our union was unblessed by offspring, this circumstance marred not the felicity which was enjoyed by Eleanor and myself. At length a sorrow came in the form of the sudden and alarming illness of Mrs. Sedley; and in spite of all the skill and attention which medical aid could devote or gold procure, she sank into the tomb. My Eleanor was for a long time inconsolable: but at length her grief gave way to resignation—and then a short tour into Devonshire succeeded in restoring her to her wonted spirits."

Again the baronet paused for a few minutes, at the expiration of which he resumed his narrative in the following words:—

"It was on our return to the Manor, after this brief absence of a few weeks, that we formed the acquaintance of one whose name I can scarcely mention without a feeling of mingled horror and indignation, so intense that it almost suffocates me. I allude to Philip Ramsey, who had only a short time before become a partner in Mr. Martin's bank. He was then a young man of about four-and-twenty, with a handsome person, a prepossessing address,

and highly accomplished; and he speedily became a frequent visitor at the Manor. I insensibly experienced a great regard for him: his good temper, unvarying gaiety, affability, and extensive knowledge, rendered him a welcome guest. Mr. Martin, who was an elderly man, had been intimate with my parents, and was considered by me as one of my best friends; and thus you will not be surprised to learn that when the two partners mooted certain proposals to me of a financial nature, I listened with much attention and interest. In a word, they represented the amount of benefit which a liberal banking and loan system would confer upon the farmers of the surrounding districts,—by saving that class of the industrious population from the rapacity of money-lenders, and from the necessity of forcing sales of their grain at large sacrifices. I cordially approved of the scheme; and the partners, having succeeded in making this favourable impression upon me, began to throw out hints relative to their want of adequate capital to carry out these philanthropic views. The bait took—and I ingenuously assured them that such an obstacle should not be allowed to stand in their way, as I would cheerfully advance any reasonable sum that they might require. I was rich, and had the means,—too rich and too well contented with the fortune I enjoyed, to be influenced by any selfish motives. It was therefore animated only with the desire to prove useful to a most deserving class, that I suffered myself to be drawn into a partnership with Martin and Ramsey. This connexion rendered us more intimate, if possible, than ever; and Ramsey in particular scarcely ever suffered an evening to elapse without calling at the Manor. Shortly after the settlement of those financial matters, the death of my relative in Devonshire called me into that county; and my wife being somewhat indisposed at the time, could not accompany me. I was absent for nearly two months; and on my return, Eleanor welcomed me with an enthusiasm which at the time filled my heart with joy, but which I now look back upon as the affectation of a vile duplicity. I learnt that Mr. Ramsey had been constant in his visits during my absence; and I remember that I thanked him with friendly warmth for the attentions he had thus shown to my beloved Eleanor. Insensate fool that I was! how could I have been so blind? My return was seized upon by my wife as an excuse for giving a grand festival; and I soon began to perceive that a fondness for company and pleasure was gaining a rapid ascendancy over her. She grew expensive in her dress—her jewellery—her equipage—and her entertainments; and the once quiet and tranquil Manor was in course of time transformed into a scene of incessant gaiety. I never remonstrated with Eleanor so long as her proceedings involved no expenditure that exceeded our income: for I loved her too devotedly—too tenderly to thwart her in anything that afforded her gratification. Neither did the slightest sentiment of jealousy animate me when I saw that Ramsey was constantly by her side,—ever her partner in the dance, her companion in equestrian excursions, and her right-hand neighbour at the dinner-table. But if I ever reflected at all upon the subject, I saw nothing improper in such assiduity on the part of a young man whom many circumstances placed almost on the footing of a brother to us both. Thus three or four years passed away; and I became so accustomed to the gay—I might even call it dissipated life which we led, that pleasure grew as necessary to me as if I had plunged into it voluntarily, instead of being drawn into the vortex by the example of a wife whom I adored. In the meantime, Martin was constantly assuring me that the bank was in a highly prosperous condition; and, as I never interfered with him in the management of the business, I had not the slightest suspicion that the affairs were otherwise than as he represented them. Indeed, the luxurious mode of life maintained by himself and Ramsey appeared to confirm the statements thus made to me; as it never struck me that they were capable of living beyond the incomes produced by their legitimate share of the profits. But a storm—a fearful storm was brewing over me,—ready to burst with an appalling violence!"

Sir Richard Stamford again ceased speaking for a short period; and Page began to imagine that the dreadful charges subsisting against the baronet would be disposed of in such a manner as to shift the burthen of guilt entirely from his shoulders to those of others.

"Yes—the dark clouds were gathering rapidly," resumed Sir Richard; "and I beheld them not—suspected them not! Oh! how terrible is the fury of that tempest which explodes so suddenly upon a dead calm, and without even the previous warning of a single drop of rain! Thus was it in my unfortunate case; and I must now summon all my courage—all my composure—all my self-command to aid me in approaching the fearful incidents of Monday last. I rose on that day with a heart as light and free from care as if there were no such thing as adversity in the world—as if no storm ever swept over the unruffled ocean of life! Eleanor was gay, tender, and affectionate as usual,—nay, more so—for she had an object in view! My God—when I think of all that duplicity into whose depths my mental perception can now plunge as if it were a crystal stream transparent to its pebbly bed! While we were seated at breakfast, she turned the conversation upon Lady Wentworth's beautiful pair of grey ponies, which her husband Sir William had purchased for her last week; and by degrees did my syren-wife lead me on till I promised that she should be enabled to vie with—if not eclipse her friend in the graceful attractions of her equipage. Then Eleanor told me how Mr. Ramsey had casually mentioned to her that a similar pair of ponies was to be procured at a certain dealer's in Aylesbury; and after breakfast I set out for the town with the view of procuring them at any price. For never had Eleanor seemed more seductively beautiful—never more charmingly captivating than on this occasion. O Woman—daughter of Eve!—why art thou ever loveliest when thine heart is most filled with guile?"

And Page knew by the sounds which he heard that the baronet was wringing his hands bitterly—bitterly, as he uttered those last words in a tone of penetrating anguish.

"Unsuspicious, frank, and confiding, I went forth to purchase for my wife the objects of her phantasy," continued the baronet, growing more excited as his narrative approached its catastrophe; "and in this disposition I rode into Aylesbury, followed as usual by my groom. Having put up my horse at the livery-stables, and dispensing with the attendance of the servant for a couple of hours, I called at the bank to procure a new cheque-book; and there I learnt that

Mr. Martin had departed on the preceding evening for London on pressing business. It struck me at the moment that Ramsey seemed pale and even confused as he gave me this information: but I attributed his appearance and manner to the bustle of business, and took my leave. I thence proceeded to the horse-dealer's, and after some little bargaining purchased the ponies, for the price of which I at once wrote a cheque upon the bank. Having thus fulfilled the principal object of my visit to Aylesbury on that occasion, I was returning to the livery-stables where I had left my horse, when I recollected that my gold watch-chain was broken; and as it had been in my possession some years, and was completely out of fashion, I resolved to treat myself to a new one. I accordingly entered the jeweller's shop at which we were accustomed to deal, and made a selection of a new chain. My invariable custom had been to pay ready money to all tradesmen save those with whom it was convenient to have running accounts for the domestic purposes of the Manor; and I accordingly wrote a cheque for the amount of the chain. But as I handed it to the jeweller, I saw that he fidgetted and seemed embarrassed, as if wishing to say something to which he was nevertheless afraid to give utterance; and I began to question him. Then, with many apologies for troubling me—many excuses for mentioning so delicate a subject—and many expressions of hope that he should not lose mine or her ladyship's custom, he observed that having a very large sum to pay in the course of the month, he should feel infinitely obliged if I would settle the account which had been running for the last three years! I was astounded—stupified. What could the man mean? Whenever Eleanor had fancied any new article of jewellery, I had invariably given her the money to purchase it: how, then, could there be a bill owing? An explanation took place;—and, with indescribable feelings of sorrow and amazement, did I learn that Lady Stamford was indebted to the jeweller in the amount of eight hundred pounds! I endeavoured to master my feelings as well as I was able, so as not to suffer the shopkeeper to perceive that my wife had grossly deluded me; and when he opened his books to show me the statement which afforded such terrible evidence of Eleanor's extravagance, I felt sick at heart on discovering farther proofs of her duplicity. For on examining the items, I found that articles which she had represented to me as having cost twenty guineas were in reality a hundred; and so on throughout the entire category. Still, however, veiling the intense anguish which racked me, I gave a cheque for the amount due, and took my departure. As I was proceeding towards the livery-stables, wrapped up in the most painful meditations, I met the horse-dealer of whom I had purchased the ponies. His countenance had in it something so ominous as he accosted me, that I was struck by his aspect; and no tongue can describe my dismay when he somewhat rudely informed me that my cheque had been dishonoured at the bank. Assuring him that there must be some egregious mistake, and bidding him return home and wait for me, I hurried to the bank, where I questioned the cashier, Mr. Ramsey being out at the time. I then learnt enough to convince me that the affairs of the establishment had long been in a most disordered state, and that they had now reached a point when insolvency was inevitable. With a suffocating sensation in the throat and a pressure upon the brain, I went into the private office and commenced an examination of the books. Little accustomed as I was to accounts, yet heaven knows that it was far from a difficult matter to perceive even through that multitude of figures the utter ruin of the establishment. For two hours did I pore over those books until my head swam round—my brain reeled—and my senses appeared to be deserting me. I waited for Ramsey—still he came not; and I at length took my departure. It was now five o'clock in the evening—and I felt so thoroughly wretched that I experienced a repugnance to return home. How could I reproach Eleanor for her extravagances which a comparatively small sum would remedy—when my imprudence in rushing headlong into that fatal partnership had involved us in ruin? I was demented—and feeling that I required to be alone in order to reason with myself, I entered a tavern and ordered dinner merely for the sake of having a private room for an hour or two. There I remained until nine o'clock—and heaven only can tell what myriads of agonising, despairing thoughts swept through my brain during that interval!"

There was another pause, at which Page was almost wildly impatient, though he said nothing: but the interest and curiosity now awakened within him, were intense even to poignancy.

"Oh! you can well believe that my reflections were of no pleasurable description!" exclaimed the baronet, at length breaking a prolonged interval of silence. "But I could have borne the ruin in which the villany of my partners involved me—yes, I could have borne *that* cheerfully—had it not been for the crushing discoveries I had made respecting my wife! And as I meditated upon the duplicity of her conduct, suspicions of another nature began to steal into my mind,—at first gradually, faintly, and imperceptibly, like the breaking of the dawn,—then with a gleaming more intense, lighting up as it were all the unfathomable depths of my own soul and bringing forth ideas which seemed to have always had a latent and slumbering though unknown existence there,—and then rushing in upon my appalled imagination with a vividness that struck me with dismay. A thousand little circumstances suddenly appeared to spring to life in my memory—all combining to strengthen those horrible suspicions, and rivet the conviction that it was not alone in her expenditure that Eleanor had deceived me! Yes—yes—I saw it all: she was faithless to me—and Ramsey was her paramour! My tongue felt like a flaming coal—Vesuvius seemed glowing in my brain—the Maelstroom raging in my heart. I rose from my seat—staggering against the wall for support; and there I sustained myself for a few minutes, literally unable to move. And now you may say it was providential, or that it was a mere matter of chance,—but it is nevertheless a fact that the little incident of thus leaning against the wall was the cause of my obtaining a deeper insight into the villany of my partners. For I heard voices in the adjoining room—and, as the partition was thin, I could not help catching what was said. Judge of my feelings when I found that the occupants of the next apartment were Martin and Ramsey! Yes—I knew their voices in a moment;—and now I listened in breathless suspense. Martin was speaking at the time; and I heard him explain to Ramsey how *the forgeries had been so skilfully executed that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in selling out the stock at the Bank of England!* The wretch, then, had been to London

on his iniquitous business, and had only just returned. And Ramsey was laughing at the accounts he gave of his success; and they drank to each other's health—for they had been dining together. I was rivetted to the spot: my ear was nailed to the wall;—and now Ramsey began to tell his partner in fraud how he had been that afternoon to the Manor while he knew that I was in Aylesbury,—how he had seen Lady Stamford and revealed to her the ruin which had assailed the bank,—how he and Martin had taken good care of themselves,—and how they had hit upon a certain plan for disposing of *me*—her husband—to which she had finally consented, though with some hesitation. What this plan was, did not appear: but I heard enough to convince me that Martin had made all the arrangements when in London to carry it into execution. The wretches! did they intend to murder me? My blood boiled as if a lava-stream were circulating in my veins: but still I listened. Martin now spoke; and it appeared that he had succeeded in finding out in London a certain Joseph Warren, nicknamed the *Magsman*, who had cheerfully undertaken for a heavy bribe the business which they had in hand regarding *me!* Ramsey asked Martin if he were sure that this Warren would be punctual—and the reply was in the affirmative. They then spoke of Warren in connexion with some former transaction relative to spurious coin; and Martin reminded Ramsey how well the man had behaved in that instance. I know not how it was that I restrained the indignation and the fury which were boiling within me as all this complication of atrocity was developed: but I suppose it was that I desired to remain and hear the two miscreants to the end. And perhaps I was the more completely rivetted to the spot inasmuch as I sought to glean the nature of the dark and mysterious project that they had devised relative to myself. But presently the seducer of my wife—the villain Ramsey—began to speak of her in such light, loose, and ribald terms that I felt maddened as if drops of molten lead were falling upon my brain;—and when, no longer able to restrain myself, I was about to rush from the room and burst into the presence of the two men, a dizziness came over me and I sank senseless upon a chair."

Here the baronet paused again; and moanings of unutterable anguish escaped him.

"By heaven!" cried Page, "if I can only get out of this place, I will hunt those two scoundrels into Newgate before I have done with them! But pray proceed, Sir Richard—I am dying to hear the rest."

"And the remainder is terrible!" exclaimed the unfortunate baronet, with the emphasis of a poignant mental agony. "I told you how I sank down in a swoon," he continued, endeavouring to master his emotions: "when I awoke from that senseless state, my watch informed me that nearly half-an-hour must have elapsed while I remained thus unconscious of all that was passing. I listened again at the partition wall: but the voices had ceased—all was silent. The villains had evidently retired. How was I to act? I was bewildered—stunned—stupified. Should I return home, and wreak my vengeance upon my wife? No—I could not harm her, guilty though she were; for her beautiful image floated with supplicating eyes before me! But I felt that to forgive her were impossible. And then those two miscreants—how was I to act towards *them?* Oh! it was easy to decide that point: I was a magistrate, and could myself issue warrants for their apprehension. This I resolved to do in the morning—for I was too heart-sick, too much exhausted with mental anguish, and too deeply overwhelmed with ineffable woe, to take any deliberate step that night. It was twelve o'clock when I reached the Manor; and the servant who opened the door to admit me into the house, stated that Mr. Ramsey had been waiting for the last two hours to see me. An unnatural composure took possession of me: I cannot account for it—but such was the fact;—and I resolved to hear all that my villanous partner might have to say before I proclaimed how much I knew. I entered the dining-room, where my wife was seated on one side of the supper-table and Ramsey on the other. I threw myself upon a chair with no affected exhaustion, but a real weariness alike of mind and body; and Lady Stamford inquired what had detained me at Aylesbury so long. I observed that there was a subdued anxiety and a tremulousness in her voice; and when I endeavoured to speak, my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. Ramsey remarked upon the loveliness of the night, which was of frosty clearness and moonlit; and he asked me to walk out with him into the shrubbery, as he wished to converse with me upon matters of great importance. It flashed to my mind all in a moment that he sought to inveigle me into some snare—perhaps to put into execution the mysterious scheme against me at which he and Martin had so darkly hinted;—and my blood, an instant before so sluggish, began to circulate like thrilling electricity in my veins Starting from my seat, I poured forth the most bitter invectives alike against Ramsey and Lady Stamford. Did my life depend upon it, I could not now recapitulate all that I then said: but I recollect that in a few hasty and cutting words I revealed enough to convince the guilty pair that everything was discovered. With incredible rapidity I must have glanced at the scene at the jeweller's—the dishonoured cheque—the examination of the bank-books—and the conversation which I had overheard at the inn. Ramsey sate stupified upon his chair: my wife became distracted—throwing herself at my feet—confessing all and everything of which I accused her—and imploring my mercy and my pardon. The scene was terrible: my eyes must have flashed fire—my features must have been convulsed with rage. Sensations of deep and burning hatred filled my soul—and my brain was in a ferment. But still my wife knelt before me, with upturned eyes and clasped hands—and her penetrating, agonising voice, rendered wild with despair, continued to beseech my forgiveness. Oh! even now that voice rings through my head,—and the sound will never cease to vibrate there—no, not when old age shall have made my ears impervious—if I live so long! Suddenly I spurned her from me—and she fell back: but in the next moment she started up with a wild and piercing cry, and seizing a sharp fruit-knife that lay too ready at hand, plunged it with the energetic violence of despair into her own bosom. Both Ramsey and myself rushed forward at the same instant to arrest the hand which wielded the fatal weapon that flashed across our eyes in the lamp-light; but we were too late—the wretched woman's movement was as rapid as if under the influence of a sudden shock of galvanism—and the blow was dealt with the vivid

speed of the lightning. Oh! my God—my God! what awful feelings took possession of me when I beheld that beauteous being weltering in her gore at my feet! Forgotten was her guilt, as if guilty she had never been; and I remembered only that she was lovely and beloved!"

The baronet ceased speaking, but burst forth into agonising lamentations, which sounded dreadful to the ears of the commercial traveller through the deep darkness. At any time and under any circumstances it is a sad and mournful thing for one man to hear another sobbing as if his heart would break: but when those passionate expressions of an ineffable woe acquire a tomb-like and hollow intonation from the caverned echoes of a dungeon—and when they burthen an atmosphere as black as the blackest night, the effect is solemnly and mysteriously appalling.

Page crept up to the side of his wretched companion—and, taking his hand, endeavoured to console him: but many minutes elapsed ere Sir Richard Stamford could so far recover himself as to bring his strange and terribly romantic narrative to a conclusion.

"Yes," he resumed, in a low, deep, and profoundly mournful tone: "at that moment, when I beheld her lying dead before my eyes, I would have given worlds to recall her back to life. And I remember that suddenly starting from the stupefaction into which the frightful tragedy had plunged me, I felt a panic-terror come over me—an appalling dread as if I myself had murdered her! I also recollect that rushing wildly away from the scene of horror, I threw up the window opening on the lawn, and darted madly forth into the fresh air that the midnight breeze might cool my burning brain. As if demented—or possessed of an evil spirit that was raging within me—I ran frantically on until I reached the park; and then suddenly stopping and turning round—I know not under what strange influence—I beheld flames gushing forth from the windows of the dining-room. Resuming the wild and unnatural speed that had previously hurried me away from the Manor, I flew back towards the burning pile: but scarcely had I emerged from the park and entered the shrubbery, when three or four men sprang upon me from the dark shade of the evergreens—and I was overpowered in an instant. The wretches bore me away to the adjacent road—thrust me into a covered cart that was waiting there—and gagged me to prevent my voice from alarming the domestics and tenants whose forms I had seen moving rapidly about the mansion, in the terrific light of the conflagration. The vehicle rolled rapidly away pursuing the main road towards London; and having changed the horse twice at lonely wayside public-houses, it entered the metropolis just as the clocks were striking five in the morning. I was then blindfolded, doubtless to prevent me from even forming a conjecture as to the direction which was now taken;—but I could judge by a few instructions which the leader of the party gave the driver from time to time, that the van was purposely pursuing a circuitous route. Finally, it was about six o'clock, as I have already informed you, when I was removed from the vehicle and thrust into this cell. Since that moment I have been enabled to calculate the lapse of time by the regularity with which the wretches bring me my sorry meals. But solitude—darkness—the terrific nature of my thoughts—a poignant sense of the tremendous injuries I have sustained at the hands of those whom I never injured—and the incessant contemplation of the wrongs that have been heaped upon me by persons whom I never wronged,—all this would have driven me mad—mad—had not your presence here this night given me a companion to whose ears I could unburthen my pent-up, suffocating misery! Oh! the malignant fiends—what do they require of me? That I should sign some paper with the contents of which I am not to be made acquainted—and that I shall consent to expatriate myself for ever to the American Continent, where a handsome pecuniary allowance will be made me. These are the terms on which my freedom can be obtained—these are the conditions which are proposed to me every time my meals are brought. Vainly have I questioned the man who is thus appointed to attend upon me,—vainly have I questioned him, I say, upon many points which so nearly regard me! He is speechless save in respect to a constant reiteration of those terms to which I cannot accede. But now, alas! from your lips I learn that my fame is blackened—that my reputation is assailed by the seducer of my poor wife and his equally vile partner in iniquity. Oh! to escape—to escape from this dungeon, and invoke the justice of the tribunals to decide between *them* and *me!*"

"And it will be no difficult matter to prove your innocence," said Page: "for the forgeries at the Bank of England can doubtless be traced to Mr. Martin—the cashier at your late establishment in Aylesbury can give sufficient testimony to clear you of any complicity in the misappropriation of the funds—and the fact of your incarceration here will show how urgent were the reasons that have induced your partners thus to dispose of you. The only points—and they are, after all, the most serious ——"

"Speak, my friend—speak candidly," exclaimed the baronet, perceiving that the commercial traveller hesitated.

"I was alluding, Sir Richard, to the—the—death of Lady Stamford and the burning of the Manor," continued Page. "But I might as well inform you of a fact which I read in the newspapers, and which cannot possibly be known to you,—and this is, that the flames were speedily extinguished without having done much injury ——"

"And the corpse of her whom I deplore in spite of her deep guilt—— was *that* discovered?" asked the baronet in a low and tremulous tone.

"The flames had not reached it," replied the commercial traveller; "and it was discovered on the carpet, just as it must have fallen at first—with the fatal weapon still in the bosom. A Coroner's Inquest was to have been held yesterday—but I of course am ignorant of the result."

"Surgical evidence may perhaps prove the mortal blow to have been inflicted by the hand of suicide and not by that of a murderer," observed Sir Richard.

"Let us hope for the best!" exclaimed Page.

"Amen!" returned the baronet, fervently.

A long silence then ensued in the dungeon.

CHAPTER XII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

It is necessary to inform the reader who may be unacquainted with London, that St. James's Square is immediately behind Pall Mall West, and that the backs of the houses in the former are contiguous with the backs of those in the latter.

The dwelling of Mrs. Brace, the celebrated milliner, was in Pall Mall: but she likewise tenanted the house immediately behind it, and the front of which accordingly looked into St. James's Square. The one in Pall Mall had the shop, show-rooms, and toilette-chambers usual in a large and fashionable millinery establishment: the other, in the Square, had all the appearance of a handsome private residence.

Between these two houses there was a means of communication; and as Mrs. Brace's abode was a place of assignation for the voluptuaries and demi-reps of the West End, nothing could possibly be more convenient for the purpose—the lady entering by the shop in Pall Mall, and the gentleman by the door in St. James's Square.

Mrs. Brace now a lady of about forty years of age; and though her charms had expanded into a maturity even more voluptuous than the fulness of *embonpoint*, she nevertheless might still be pronounced a very fine woman. Her features were masculine, large, and expressive of a sensual disposition; but their outline was handsome—and a splendid set of well-preserved teeth, a fine pair of dark eyes, and black hair which Time had left unmarred by a single streak of grey, gave her a certain air of beauty which failed not to find admirers.

She was always dressed with elegance—sometimes with splendour also; but even in the magnificence of her apparel, good taste was invariably recognised. Nothing could be more charming than the coquettish morning cap, with flowing ribands, in which she appeared at the breakfast table: nothing more graceful than the wrapper which she wore *en deshabillée* until about eleven in the forenoon. At that hour she would retire to her chamber, whence in the course of ten minutes she emerged in a morning-gown of the newest pattern; and her morocco slippers were exchanged for well-fitting shoes—for Mrs. Brace was justly proud of a nicely shaped foot and ankle. But it was at about three in the afternoon that this lady might be seen in the perfection of her toilette. If it were summer time, she would appear in a muslin dress of the most exquisite material, or perhaps in a light silk: but whichever it were, be well assured that its make and style were faultless. In winter she would wear either the richest satin or the most glossy velvet; and as her complexion was good—enhanced, perhaps, a little by means of cosmetics—the dark hues of these dresses set her off to the greatest advantage. Instead of bedizening herself with a profusion of jewellery, she displayed but little about her person: nevertheless, the ear-pendants, the chain, and the one ring which she might wear in addition to the wedding-ring, were certain to be chaste, elegant, and costly.

Then her manners were so fascinating,—obliging and affable, without sycophancy—polite and respectful, without the slightest taint of cringing servility. All the young ladies in her establishment partook of their meals at a large table where she presided; and the honours were done by her with as winning a courtesy and as strict a propriety as if she were entertaining a number of select guests instead of her own work-girls. And a bevy of beauteous creatures were they—upwards of a dozen in number, and forming a combination of charms as well as displaying a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. But, alas! every one of these captivating beings had been sacrificed in her turn to some stripling of the aristocracy or hoary voluptuary whose gold was deemed a sufficient price to purchase gems of female chastity.

For upwards of fifteen years had Mrs. Brace been established in Pall Mall: what she was previously to her appearance there, no one knew. She represented herself as a widow—and perhaps was: but she never volunteered any explanation relative to the calling, profession, or business of her late husband. She had set up in business with a large capital, and was not only able to pay her own way without an effort, but likewise to give one—two—or even three years' credit to her aristocratic customers. No one, therefore, took any trouble to fathom her antecedents; and as her establishment was conducted with all the outward appearance of the strictest propriety, its real nature was known only to a very limited circle.

Precisely at six o'clock in the evening, Octavia Clarendon alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of Mrs. Brace's shop in Pall Mall; and on entering, she was immediately accosted by that lady herself, who had no trouble in recognising the lovely creature whose personal appearance had already been fully described to her.

"Be so kind as to walk this way, Miss," said Mrs. Brace, with such a winning smile and such a pleasing manner that Octavia instantly recovered from the embarrassment into which she had been thrown on finding herself in a large shop, splendidly fitted up, and filled with beautiful girls whose brilliant eyes were all simultaneously raised towards her.

Miss Clarendon followed the amiable and handsome lady up a magnificent staircase, into a small but elegantly furnished room; and the moment she crossed the threshold, Mr. Harley, who was already there, came forward to receive her.

The door closed behind Octavia, Mrs. Brace gliding noiselessly out as she drew it after her;—and the young maiden was now alone with her lover.

"How can I sufficiently thank you, charming girl, for proving thus mindful of your promise?" exclaimed Harley, leading her to a sofa, and placing himself by her side. "Oh! I was fearful that you would disappoint me—I trembled lest something might occur to retain you at home!"

"Had I obeyed the dictates of prudence, I should not have come," responded Octavia, casting down her eyes and blushing deeply: "but——"

"But inclination prompted you, dearest girl," added Mr. Harley, perceiving that she stopped short with increasing embarrassment. "Yes—tell me the truth—confess that you were not altogether displeased at the idea of seeing me again——"

"Were it otherwise than as you wish me to say, I should not be here now," observed Octavia: then, as a sudden thought struck her, she glanced has-

tily around, and her looks settled with an expression of alarm upon her companion's countenance, as she exclaimed, "But wherefore has that lady who conducted me hither, left us?"

"Because she is discreet, my angel," responded Harley, regarding the beauteous maiden with eyes brimful of passion: "because she knows what love is, and how lovers like to be alone;—and because she is well aware that we have much—Oh! so much to say to each other! Be not alarmed, dearest Octavia—much less offended:—do you think that I would act otherwise than according to the dictates of that affection which I bear towards you, and which I revealed last evening?"

"No, George—no," murmured the maiden, yielding to the bland influence of his seductive tongue and the melting harmony of his rich voice: "I have every confidence in you, George——"

"And my life's study shall be your happiness, my well-beloved!" exclaimed Harley, throwing his arm round her waist and drawing her gently towards him.

He was attired in a most elegant and tasteful manner: his shirt-frill and ruffles were of the finest lace;—his black pantaloons and silk stockings, fitting tight and fashioned with the most artistic shapeliness, displayed the admirably though robust symmetry of his limbs;—and his waistcoat set with the nicest precision. He appeared handsomer in Octavia's eyes than she had even fancied him to be, much as she had already admired him; and there was something so noble in his air, and at the same time so captivating in his manner, that while she felt as if she were in the presence of a superior, yet she was not overawed.

Nevertheless, she trembled like a dove, and her heart fluttered in her bosom like a bird in its cage, when Harley drew her towards him: but when he pressed his warm lips to her's, and their very looks appeared to mingle in the transfusion of a tender-

ness which seemed to be the blending of their spirit, indescribable sensations of joy, and pleasure, and bliss came over her—and she suffered him gently to remove her bonnet and her thick winter-shawl.

Then he smoothed down her shining auburn hair, and toyed with her long glossy ringlets that framed her blushing cheeks and swept over her heaving bosom;—and the maiden felt how delicious it was to love and be beloved!

"You told me that you had so much to say to me, George," she murmured, her words appearing to borrow a more liquid intonation from the moistness of the inviting red lips between which they passed.

"Yes, my angel," he replied, his own voice becoming more tender and seductively low: "I wished to make you comprehend how sincerely—how devotedly I love you! But now that we are together, my feelings are so intense that it seems as if no language were capable of explaining them. I am lost as it were in the contemplation of the boundlessness of my love, to which I can no more assign a limit than even the wisest philosopher can form an idea of infinite space or eternity. For my love is as vast as space and as enduring as time itself; and I know not how to describe it otherwise. Tell me, dearest,—have you ever, when gazing at night up into the vault of heaven, studded with stars,—have you ever fancied that your soul expands with the greatness of that empyrean space which it contemplates?—and then, after striving to penetrate in imagination into the mysteries which lie beyond, have you felt your spirit return as it were to its clay, wing-weary—humbled—and dissatisfied? If such have ever been your sensations, you can conceive how vain it is for me to seek to measure the illimitable love which I bear you—how useless to calculate its immensity—and how depressed becomes my soul when I cannot find words to shape the ideas which I would fain convey to your comprehension."

Octavia hung with rapture and delight upon every syllable that fell, in such soft and melting harmony, from the lips of her lover; and so lost was she in the dream-like voluptuousness that enveloped her as with a halo—so completely did she abandon herself to the heavenly vision that seemed to have stolen over her senses—that she observed not the encroachment of Harley's hand upon the treasures of her virgin bosom. And as he now pressed the glowing—palpitating—heaving orb, he bent his face down so that his cheeks reposed against her's; and then he fastened his lips to her's—inhaling all the fragrance of her breath.

By degrees he became bolder; and Octavia, awakening as it were from her dream of bliss, struggled to extricate herself from his embrace: but he wound his arms around her—he strained her to his breast—he murmured impassioned words, and vows, and protestations in her ear—and with kisses he stifled the remonstrances and the beseechings that rose to her lips.

The imagination of the young maiden grew inflamed, as the toyings of her lover became bolder; and half-raising her in his arms, he supported her across the room to a door which opened to his touch at the farther end. But no sooner did the light of the wax-candles reveal to her the fact that there was a bed in this inner chamber, than suddenly recovering all her presence of mind, and casting off in a moment the voluptuous languor that had come over her, Octavia tore herself from his embrace, exclaiming, "O George! is this your love for me?—would you plunge me into the depths of shame and degradation?"

"Beautiful being!" cried Harley, seizing her hands and pressing them one after the other to his lips: "wherefore do you reproach me? Should not I rather ask you where is that love which you have suffered me to believe that your soul cherishes for me? Oh! give me a love that knows nothing save its own inclinations—that can obey no dictates save those of the heart which contains it—and that absorbs in its own intensity all worldly considerations, all social conventions, and all the cold repugnances of a miserable prudery!—give me such a love as this, my Octavia," exclaimed Harley, his countenance becoming absolutely splendid as he made this impassioned appeal to the maiden's feelings,—"give me such a love as this, my angel—and I will deserve it by a life devoted to you—by an existence surrendered altogether to the delightful duty of ensuring your happiness—and by the homage, the adoration, and the worship of my heart!"

And as he uttered these last words, he dropped her hands and extended his arms towards her.

"O George! what would you have me do?" she murmured, throwing herself upon his breast and raising her countenance to receive the fervid kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks.

"I would have you become mine—wholly mine!" he answered, after a short pause: "I would have you receive me as your husband now—this very evening—that I may be assured of having won you so completely that I need fear no rival! For I am jealous, Octavia—Oh! if I have a fault, it is that I am jealous;—and until your father has returned and given his assent to our union—aye, even until our hands are joined at the altar—I shall never know an instant's peace. And it is because I love you so devotedly, my Octavia—because I adore you with such a full measure of worship—that I am jealous of you;—and if I beseech you to have compassion upon me, and give me every proof of love that woman *can* give—'tis only that I may console myself when away from you by the conviction that I have secured a treasure which no rival can take from me!"

"My God! what shall I do?" murmured Octavia, weeping with mingled delight and pain. "Oh! why demand such a proof of my affection, George? Can you not put faith in me?—can you not believe that I love you?"

"Forgive me, dearest, if I reiterate the tale of my jealousy," exclaimed Harley, straining the yielding maiden more closely to his breast: "but 'tis a weakness that I cannot conquer. Have pity upon me, then—have pity upon me!—torture me not with those racking anxieties——"

"Have pity upon *me*, George!" cried Octavia, gliding from his arms and sinking at his feet—her hair, which had escaped from its confinement, flowing all dishevelled down her back, and her dress in the disorder into which his toyings had thrown it:—"have pity upon *me*, I say—have pity upon *me!*"

And she extended her clasped hands towards him.

The voluptuary was for an instant chagrined with disappointment;—and, supporting himself against the edge of a table, he bent upon her a look the momentary vexation of which changed into an expression of licentious admiration—so beautiful was she, thus kneeling at his feet, with her hair wantoning over her shoulders, and her palpitating bosom all revealed through the disorder of her dress.

"Octavia, you love me not—you will drive me mad!" he suddenly exclaimed, playing with an infernal artifice upon the tender susceptibilities and yielding sensitiveness of the affectionate girl: and he turned abruptly away, as if about to leave the room.

"O heaven! he says that I love him not!" cried the maiden, wildly, as she sprang to her feet; and in another moment she was again clasped in his arms.

Alas! alas!—our soul is exceeding sorrowful for thee, Octavia Clarendon—for thou art now in the power of the seducer! Defoliated is the flower of thy chastity;—and thou knowest not to whom thou hast surrendered thyself!

But if Mr. Harley possessed a diabolical skill in enacting the part of the betrayer of innocence, he was not the less expert in soothing the soul that was now stricken with remorse and in quieting the alarms that succeeded the burning moments of pleasure. He who had ere now spoken of the poverty of language when used to convey ideas of a fervent love, found that it was rich in vows, protestations, and oaths calculated to solace the mind of the ruined girl. And how could she do otherwise than suffer herself to be thus consoled?—on what other reed could she lean save the promise of her lover?—was it for her to give way to despair, ere hope had ceased to exist? Oh! no—and Octavia, abandoning herself entirely to that confidence which her very position compelled her to place in her seducer, smiled upon him through her tears—and gave herself completely up to him—and shut out from her vision the world which she had as it were quitted, in order the more fully to enjoy the delights of that elysian sphere into which he had wafted her.

It was past ten o'clock when she quitted the milliner's establishment—alone: for Harley made her understand that the "respectability" of the house would be compromised if they were seen issuing forth together. But ere they separated, he had obtained from her a promise that she would meet him there again on the ensuing evening, provided her father did not return home in the interval; in which case he gave her the address of an hotel where he alleged that he was staying in London, and where she might write to him.

Heaven only knows what excuse Octavia made to her sister for her prolonged absence of several hours: certain however it is that the latter suspected nothing;—and as they retired to rest immediately after the guilty girl reached her home, the burning blushes that every other minute rose to her cheeks, likewise escaped the notice of the innocent Pauline.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUNGEON.

THE dungeon in which Sir Richard Stamford and the commercial traveller were confined, was in reality a large vaulted cellar. The walls and roof were of massive masonry: the floor consisted of the damp unpaved ground. A quantity of straw was spread in one corner to form the baronet's couch; and this had not been changed during the few days that he had been an inmate of the place.

Upon that sorry bed the prisoners snatched two or three hours' repose, after Sir Richard had told his lamentable tale:—they slept through sheer exhaustion—a sleep that was rather the prostration of all the physical and mental powers, than the slumber which has a refreshing influence with it and imparts new vigour alike to body and mind when the eyes open again.

Yes—they slept the heavy and leaden sleep which misery often knows;—and when they awoke again, it was not to the cheering beams of the morning sun—nor to the whispering of the breeze rustling through the defoliated boughs of winter,—but to the intense darkness of their cell, and to the din of the falling chain and receding bolts outside the door.

And that massive door swung round upon its hinges—and then the faintest, faintest gleaming of light, shed from the staircase, penetrated glimmeringly into the dungeon,—so partially and sickly however, that it enabled not the prisoners to catch a glimpse of each other's countenance, but merely showed them the form of a man at the entrance.

"Well, how d'ye like your companion, Sir Richard?" inquired the fellow, in a gruff voice and with a free and easy tone: but it was not the Magsman, as Page had fancied at the first moment when his eyes caught the dark outlines of the somewhat stout and burly figure.

"If I were to tell you that his society was agreeable to me," answered the baronet, bitterly, "you would remove him to another place: and if I were to declare that I prefer solitude, you would leave him here in order to torment me."

"May be I should," observed the man, with a coarse and brutal chuckle. "But perhaps you'd like to know why we put him along with you at all? Well, I don't mind telling you, Sir Richard," continued the ruffian, after a brief pause, during which he found that his half-interrogative observation remained without reply. "The fact is that we wanted you to learn the real position in which you stand regarding affairs out of doors in general, and at Aylesbury in particular. It was very certain that if I had told you all *that*, you would not have believed me—you would have fancied that I was only making things look as black as the devil, on purpose to get you to accept the conditions proposed. But as Mr. Page is doubtless well acquainted with all that has occurred, and all that people now say of you—why, the chances are that he has not left you in the dark in that respect. Is it not so?"

"My companion has indeed given me a farther insight into the villanies of those who employ you to persecute me," said the baronet, in a mournful tone: then, with sudden excitement, he cried. "But can nothing move you to release me from this

dreadful place? My enemies pay you well, no doubt, to keep me here—but I will pay you better if you will let me go. I am not altogether friendless—I can give you a letter to a gentleman who will pay you a thousand pounds as the price of my freedom——"

"Come now—none of that nonsense with me!" interrupted the man, savagely: "I am not to be bribed. The only way in which you can obtain your liberty, is to sign the paper."

"Then I will *not* sign it!" ejaculated the baronet, with feverish energy.

"Just as you please, sir," remarked the fellow: "you will sing a different song before many days are over. Now, Mr. Page—are you awake yet?"

"A straw bed is not very provocative of slumber," responded the commercial traveller, mournfully. "But what do you require of me?"

"If you want to write a note to Hodson and Morley to ask them to ransom you, it may as well be done at once as to-morrow or next day. Five hundred guineas, you know—that is the price," exclaimed the man, with a renewal of his coarse and brutal chuckle.

"Five hundred pounds! they'll never pay it," said Page, in a voice of despair.

"You can but try them," returned the man. "Or perhaps you have some other friend——"

"Not one who will advance such a sum. However," continued the commercial traveller, "I cannot linger here all my life—that is very certain; and therefore I must make an effort. Hodson has got me into this scrape—and he ought to help me out of it."

"Ah! then old Hodson was at the bottom of the plant?" exclaimed the fellow.

"Well—since I have admitted it, there's no use attempting to deny it," returned Page. "But give me pen, ink, and paper, and a light, and I will soon pen a note to Hodson. It can do no harm, at all events."

"You can't write here—there's no table," said the man. "Come along with me for a few minutes—I'll bring you safe back again to the baronet, depend upon it."

Page accordingly issued from the dungeon, the door of which was immediately closed and bolted again; and the ruffian led the way up the stone stairs, into a back room plainly furnished. The commercial traveller threw a searching glance through the dingy window-panes of a small casement; but his looks encountered naught save the dirty walls of the buildings in the rear of the house; and he gleaned not the slightest fact indicative of the part of London where that house was situate. Not a familiar church-tower nor a well-known steeple, that might have served as an index of the locality, met his eyes: nothing save those dingy walls, with their miserable windows, whence hung a few rags to dry.

"You've no more notion where you are, old fellow, than if you'd been dropped out of the clouds," observed the man, who understood what was passing in the mind of Page; and the remark instantly attracted the looks of the commercial traveller towards the speaker, who was a great, stout, strong-built, ill-visaged ruffian, of middle age, and with an enormous wen upon the crown of his bald head.

"I must confess that I am entirely at fault," said Page, in answer to the man's observation.

"And I don't mean to enlighten you," was the gruff rejoinder. "Now, then—there's writing materials—and you'll please to put down on paper just what I'm going to tell you."

Page seated himself at the table, and intimated his readiness to begin; whereupon the ruffian, after some consideration at the beginning, and a long pause between the sentences, dictated the ensuing letter:—

"Dear Sir,

"I have unfortunately fallen into a trap, and am in the custody of those whom I meant to ensnare. The tables were completely turned against me; and I am in a horrible dungeon, situated I have not the slightest idea where. The men who have thus made me their prisoner, mean to hold me fast until five hundred pounds are paid for my ransom. I write this to the dictation of one of them. What I therefore beg of you to do, is to enclose that sum, which must all be in gold, in a bag—label it with a paper bearing the initials J. H. P.—and leave it at the bar of the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown. Within six hours after this is done, I shall have the honour of waiting upon you in Wood Street, to thank you in person for your kindness. Do not flatter yourself that Grumley or any one else will be able to find out where I am, and extricate me: nothing but your compliance with the above request will accomplish that object.

"Yours very obediently,

"*Mr. Hodson,* "J. H. PAGE.

"*Wood Street.*"

"That will do!" exclaimed the man, reading over the shoulder of the commercial traveller the letter which he himself had dictated—a process that he considered necessary in order to acquire the certainty that nothing more nor less than he had suggested was contained in the document. "I think that will induce the old merchant to come down handsomely; and, as there's honour amongst thieves," he added, with his disagreeable chuckle, "you shan't be kept in durance a minute longer than the time necessary to receive from the Beggars' Staff a message stating that the coin has been left there."

"I hope that the letter will prove effective," said Page, heaving a profound sigh as he rose from his seat.

At the same instant his eyes encountered a long, thick, and well-rusted file that lay upon a chest of drawers within reach of his hand; and it flashed to his mind that many a desperate escape from even a stronger prisonage than the cellar down stairs, had been accomplished by means of a far more inefficient implement than that old tool.

"You don't seem to be a bad sort of fellow in your way," observed the man; "and I think that a drop of something short would perhaps do you good."

Thus speaking, he turned towards a cupboard in a corner of the room; and at the same moment Page secured the file about his person.

The man produced a gin-bottle, and each partook of a dram. The commercial traveller was then directed to carry a couple of tin-pots full of coffee down to the cellar, the gaoler following him with two large slices of bread; and in a few moments the two prisoners were once more together in the dungeon, the door being again secured by bolts and chains.

For some time the baronet and Page continued to make their meal in profound silence: but when the latter had drained the last drop of his coffee and eaten the last mouthful of crust, he said in a low whispering tone, "Do you think it would be impossible to escape from this place?"

"Escape!" ejaculated Sir Richard, his veins tingling with the sensation produced by the bare idea.

"Hush! the very walls have ears!" returned the commercial traveller, seizing his companion violently by the arm: for they were seated close to each other upon the straw. "Listen—and do not interrupt me. I have written the letter to old Hodson, my employer—but I do not for a moment imagine that he will pay the money. At all events, he will take some time to consider the matter well—for he is one of those persons who never do anything in a hurry;—and in the interval I shall catch an incurable rheumatism, or die of grief in this infernal hole. It is therefore my intention to make a desperate effort to escape."

"But how?" demanded the baronet, encouraged by his companion's words, although he saw not as yet the least probability of carrying the project into execution. "The door is as solid as the masonry—the walls are hard as rock—and we have not even a nail nor the smallest piece of iron to work with."

"On the contrary, I have an excellent file which I secreted about my person just now," returned Page. "Here—take the implement in your hands and feel it."

"But the bolts and chain are outside the door—and, even if you attempt to file the iron hinges, the noise will be heard up-stairs," objected the baronet.

"We will have nothing to do with the door at all," said Page. "While I was outside the dungeon just now, I had my eyes about me, I can assure you. In the first place, I saw enough of the locality to convince me that this cellar is precisely the width of the house, which is a narrow one; and consequently, if there is any cellar adjoining, it must belong to another house. Granting, then, that there *is* a cellar on the other side of this wall against which we are leaning, we must manage to get into it—and perhaps the occupants of the next house will not prove hostile to us. At all events the risk is worth running; and this file will serve in a few hours to pick a hole through the wall large enough to allow us to pass into the adjoining place."

"Let us make the attempt, my good friend!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, joyfully. "We will work by turns with unrelaxing energy—and I will commence."

"No—let *me* begin," said the bustling commercial traveller, who felt almost happy in spite of his imprisoned condition. "By the way, the man never comes in with a light—does he?"

"Never," answered the baronet.

"That is just what I had calculated upon," said Page; and at the same moment he began to insert the pointed end of the solid file into the hard mortar of the cellar wall.

The commercial traveller was not strong: but he possessed that admixture of energy, expertness, and skill which sometimes serves a man better than mere physical power. His perseverance, when he was carried away by the excitement of any specific pursuit, was indomitable; and this spirit on his part now received a marvellous impulse from the anxiety which he felt to escape from that horrible dungeon and the small amount of reliance he placed in the willingness of Messrs. Hodson and Morley to assist him out of his dilemma. The consequence was that he worked away with a good will and a heartiness which astonished even himself; and although at the expiration of an hour, he had not even succeeded in loosening a single stone, still the mortar was removed all around one to the depth of an inch—and a beginning was thus effected in good earnest.

Sir Richard Stamford now took his turn; and, being a man of great physical strength, he soon made an impression upon the solid masonry. But every now and then it was necessary to stop for two or three minutes, in order to obtain the assurance that no one was listening outside the door: for the baronet, during his confinement in the dungeon, had frequently heard several male and female voices in the house, and therefore knew that there were many residents therein.

By about two o'clock in the afternoon the first stone was removed from its setting—and Page had the honour of this important achievement in the initiative of the task. But the labour was discontinued for a short space; inasmuch as according to such calculation of the lapse of time as the baronet was enabled to make, the presence of the gaoler might be shortly expected with the dinners. This event soon took place; and the prisoners were served with some coarse boiled meat, potatoes, and wretched table-beer. Half-an-hour was allowed them for the discussion of this meal—at the expiration of which interval the ruffian returned to the door of the cellar to take away the plates, drinking-mugs, and knives and forks.

As soon as the sounds of his retreating footsteps had died away, the work was recommenced with the file; and, as the first stone had been removed, the task grew comparatively easy. At length towards seven in the evening—according to Sir Richard's reckoning—an indentation had been effected to a sufficient depth to enable the prisoners to ascertain, by gently sounding the wall, that there was a hollow space on the other side. They therefore concluded that there was a cellar in that direction; and this belief gave them renewed energy and spirits to recommence their labours after the evening meal of coffee and bread had been served to them.

For four hours longer did they continue to work by turns—though not without grazing the skin off their hands against the asperities of the orifice which they were forming, and receiving frequent bruises on the knuckles by the slipping of the file: for it was by no means an easy task thus to toil on in the unrelieved darkness of that place.

At length the perforation was complete; and Page, thrusting his arm through the aperture, placed beyond all farther doubt the fact that there was a cellar on the other side of the wall. The removal of the last few stones, the displacement of which was necessary to render the hole large enough for the passage of a human form, was now speedily effected;—and ere midnight the old rusty file and the hands which wielded it by turns, had done their duty.

Up to this moment the baronet had scarcely been able to bring himself to believe that escape from the dungeon was really within the range of probability. He had laboured on in that same spirit of desperation which prompts the drowning man to clutch at a straw; and now that he heard himself called upon by his companion to follow through the aperture, he was as much bewildered with mingled hope and fear as that same perishing wretch might be supposed to feel when awakening on the bank to which some succouring hand had drawn him.

Unhesitatingly did Page introduce himself, legs foremost, into the large opening made in the wall: but before the baronet attempted the passage, the commercial traveller ascertained, to the ineffable joy

of both that the door of the cellar into which he had thus entered, was not locked. Inspired by this assurance, Sir Richard Stamford followed his leader;—and now they paused for a few minutes to gain breath and deliberate upon the course to be adopted.

The decision to which they came was indeed the only alternative that the circumstances offered: namely, to steal up into the house as gently as possible, and risk all the rest. It might be that they would succeed in escaping stealthily forth into the street: it might also happen that they would be overheard by the inmates; and in this latter case they must prepare to resort to means of either persuasion or violence, according to the nature of the individuals with whom they were thus to be brought in contact.

Page opened the cellar door as noiselessly as possible—and all was darkness and silence. He advanced a few steps, groping about with his extended arms. In a few moments his hands encountered the bannisters of a staircase; and up those steps he slowly and cautiously ascended, Sir Richard Stamford following close behind.

Still all was darkness and silence in the house!

They gained the ground-floor in this manner; and on entering the passage at the head of the kitchen-stairs up which they had just come, a faint glimmering of light, shed by some lamp outside or from some opposite window, peeped through the dingy fan-light over the low and narrow street-door at the farther end.

This sickly and ineffectual gleaming was just sufficient to show the two fugitives where that door was situated—but did not enable them to catch the slightest glimpse of each other's countenance.

And still all was darkness and silence in the house!

Slowly—noiselessly—and with painful caution, as if they were afraid of making even a board creak beneath their feet, they crept along the passage—taking five minutes to thread a little corridor of about as many yards in length.

Page was in advance, and consequently gained the street-door first.

He passed his hand hastily up and down, and felt that it was bolted: the key was however in the lock.

To draw back the bolts without noise was not a very easy task—for they creaked alarmingly even when moved a hair's breadth; and so gradually was this portion of the momentous night's work performed, that upwards of ten minutes were wasted thereat. But at length the bolts were drawn back—and the door was unlocked!

It now struck Page that if he and his companion were both to sally forth together, they would be more likely to attract the notice of any of their enemies who might be lurking about, than if they departed separately. But the commercial traveller dared not even trust his voice to whisper this proposal to the baronet; for he knew how even the faintest utterance of the human tongue is apt to sound amidst the deep silence in which a house is plunged at the dead of night;—and he feared that if an alarm were raised in that dwelling, it would spread throughout the neighbourhood, so that their recapture would certainly ensue. On the other hand he conjectured that if he were to open the door and issue forth himself, the baronet, in his anxiety to escape, would not have the prudence or forethought to remain a little while behind;—and in this perplexity, Page resolved upon a course which was in reality motived only by a precautionary sense, whereas it subsequently appeared in Sir Richard Stamford's estimation to be a deed of magnanimous generosity.

In a word, then, the commercial traveller opened the door as noiselessly as he could, and seizing the baronet's arm pushed him gently forth. Sir Richard was only too glad to obey the impulse; and the moment he had crossed the threshold into the open air, the door was closed behind him.

It was at this instant that a groan, apparently coming from an upper storey, but sounding with a sepulchral hollowness as if it were in an empty house, fell upon the startled ears of the commercial traveller. Still he listened, instead of rushing precipitately from the place—for the moan he had heard was rather an indication of great agony, either mental or physical, than of alarm arising from any disturbance in the house.

The groaning was repeated and continued; and the commercial traveller, ever prying and inquisitive, began to experience an inclination to satisfy his curiosity in respect to these doleful sounds. Creeping to the bottom of the stairs, he again listened with breathless attention; and now the moaning, which every instant became more intense, was mingled with ejaculations of pain and broken sentences conveying some idea of the forlorn position of the wretch who uttered them.

"Oh! this is dreadful——dreadful! To be deserted——left to die alone——alone——alone——all alone——in this desolate place! Will no one come?—a single drop of water——only a single drop——my God! my God!"

The commercial traveller had gathered sufficient to convince him that he incurred not the slightest risk by ascending to the succour of the unhappy man whose lamentations thus reached his ears;—and he accordingly groped his way up a narrow staircase, until a faint light, glimmering through the chinks in the door of a back room on the second storey, induced him to pause there and listen again.

The moans came from within; and Page unhesitatingly entered the chamber.

Heavens! what a spectacle met his eyes!

In a wretched bed, the blankets of which were of the most filthy description, lay an old man whose face was as pale as that of a corpse, and whose dim and glassy eyes, so haggard and sunken, were surrounded with that deep blueish tint which denotes the influence of a wasting disease and heralds the approach of death. His cheeks were hollow and thin; and a beard of several days' growth enhanced the hideousness of his appearance. One emaciated arm supported the aching head—the other lay outside the coverlid, which the hand was clutching as if in the frenzy of despair.

The chamber was not without furniture: but everything denoted neglect, and was characterized rather by a loathsome squalor than a downright penury. For there was food in a cupboard, the door of which stood open—and there was a bottle of spirits upon a shelf—and three or four shillings, together with some half-pence, lay upon the mantle. But everywhere dust and dirt had accumulated,—on the floor, where a scanty carpet lay all kicked up—on the blackened and grease-stained walls—on the dingy window-blind—on the chest of drawers the table, the two or three chairs, and the bed itself!

Such was the scene revealed to the eyes of the commercial traveller by means of a candle dimly burning and with a wick so long that it appeared as if it had not been snuffed for hours. A gleam of joy shot athwart the wan and ghastly countenance of the invalid as a human being thus burst upon his frightful loneliness: and Page's immediate impulse was to pour water into a cup and hold it to the parched lips of the sufferer. But the man could not raise himself even a single inch to partake of the beverage, ardently longed for though it were; and the commercial traveller was forced to lift and sustain him while he poured the water down his throat.

The cup was emptied—and as the invalid fell back in the sorry, sordid couch, his hollow eyes were raised with an expression of indescribable gratitude towards Page's countenance.

"What more can I do for you, my good man?" asked the commercial traveller, in a mild and encouraging tone. "You seem to be very, very ill—and alone——"

"Yes—yes—all alone—alone!" murmured the invalid, knitting his brows in a manner indicative of mingled rage and despair. "The ungrateful girl ——Julia——to desert her own father——leave me for hours——yes, hours——"

"Then you are hungry?—you require food—and you are unable to rise from your bed to take it?" exclaimed Page. "Ah! I understand, poor man—but I will get you food."

"Stay, sir—stay!" said the invalid, as the commercial traveller was turning towards the cupboard to fetch a morsel of bread to place between the famished being's lips: "stay, sir," he repeated, his voice acquiring strength, now that his throat was no longer parched with a torturing thirst,—"I do not require food—I could not eat—I—I am dying!"

"I will run and fetch hither a doctor!" exclaimed the bustling and agile Page, now springing towards the door.

"No—no—stay, I implore you!" said the invalid, in an appealing tone. "I am past all hope—beyond the influence of human aid—I feel that I am dying! And when I am gone—but I must not waste words—my voice is failing me—a dimness is coming over my eyes—where are you, sir?—why have you put out the light?"

And the workings of the invalid's ghastly countenance were horrible—horrible to behold!

"I am here, my good man—and I have not extinguished the light," returned Page, bending over the bed. "But speak—tell me what you have to say—give me your injunctions——"

"Stoop down—place your ear close to my lips," resumed the dying man, now speaking with extreme difficulty: "are you close?"

"Yes—yes—proceed!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, breathless with suspense.

"Place your hand beneath my pillow—just under my head," gasped the old man: "there—take that pocket-book——tell Julia——Oh! I am dying——My God! my God! pardon——mercy——Hannah——Julia—Julia——Oh! mercy——pardon——pardon——"

And with a deep groan, he expired.

At the same instant, as if with an ominous emblematic significancy, the candle sank down in its socket and was extinguished.

A panic-terror seized upon the commercial traveller; for the scene of death which he had just witnessed, and to the contemplation whereof he had been so suddenly and unexpectedly impelled by circumstances, was horrible and shocking. There was likewise something appalling in the simultaneousness with which the living man had changed into a breathless corse and the chamber was plunged into total darkness; and the state of excitement in which Page had been kept for many, many hours, now underwent a rapid and fearful reaction.

Grasping, however, the pocket-book which he had taken from beneath the old man's pillow, he hastened precipitately down the stairs,—his almost frantic speed accelerated by the horrible thought that somebody or *something* was pursuing him, and that the cold hand of a corpse would suddenly be laid upon his shoulder or would clutch the skirts of his coat.

On reaching the front-door, he began to breathe a little more freely; and while he paused for an instant to secure the pocket-book about his person, a sense of all the danger with which his egress from the house would be attended, rushed back to his mind. The death-scene had temporarily driven from his recollection the previous incidents of the night: but now he remembered that he had escaped from a horrible dungeon, and that should he encounter any of the Magsman's party while issuing forth into the street, his re-capture and renewed imprisonment were inevitable.

Nevertheless, he could not remain longer in this house of death—for the echoes of his own footsteps appeared to be the sounds of the corpse descending the stairs in pursuit of him!

Opening the door, therefore, with the courage of utter desperation, Mr. Page stepped across the threshold—and a rapid glance up and down the narrow court in which he now found himself, afforded the encouraging assurance that his movements were unobserved.

That hurried, anxious glance was sufficient to show the commercial traveller that the houses enclosing this vile alley into which he had emerged, were poor and wretched in outward appearance, and that the locality was evidently a low and disreputable neighbourhood. For an instant his eyes lingered on the two houses of which he had seen the interior: namely, the one whence he had just emerged—and that where he had been incarcerated. Lights gleamed from the upper windows of the latter; and Page thought within himself, "The miscreants in those chambers little suspect that their accursed subterranean cell is now empty!"

Away he sped from the court, the name of which he vainly endeavoured to decypher beneath the entrance archway where it was painted;—and thence he emerged into a long, narrow, and unpaved street, the aspect of whose houses confirmed him in his opinion that he was in some low neighbourhood. On he went at random, in the hope of finding a hackney-coach stand, and not choosing to ask where he was of the few stragglers whom he met, for fear of exciting some suspicion which might lead him into fresh embarrassments:—on he went, we say, penetrating through a maze of streets, and alleys, and little thoroughfares, none of the names whereof could he possibly ascertain in the darkness of the night.

Suddenly the clock of some neighbouring church proclaimed the hour of two in the morning;—and in a few minutes Page found himself in the immediate vicinity of a dock, which he knew to be in the dis-

district of Wapping. It was, then, in the eastern quarters of London that the den existed where he had been imprisoned; but were he asked to retrace his steps from the point which he had now gained to the place whence he had escaped, the endeavour would have proved utterly abortive.

His course was, however, at present clear enough; and in about three quarters of an hour he emerged upon Tower Hill. There he was fortunate enough to discover a hackney-coach, which set him down at the George and Blue Boar just as the thousand clocks of the metropolis were striking three.

CHAPTER XIV.

LORD FLORIMEL.

We must now return to the establishment of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall: for while the scene already related was taking place in one room between Mr. Harley and Octavia Clarendon, an incident of some importance was occurring in another.

It was nine o'clock on that memorable evening—the young ladies in the employment of Mrs. Brace were busily occupied in consigning the caps, bonnets, and dresses to band-boxes and drawers, preparatory to the closing of the shop for the night—and the worthy mistress of the establishment was superintending these proceedings, when a servant entered from the interior of the dwelling-house and gave her some whispered information.

"Ah! Lord Florimel!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, in an under tone; and she forthwith hastened to her own private sitting-room at the back of the premises.

It was a small but elegantly furnished apartment,—all its arrangements being quite consistent with that good taste which we have already noticed as pervading the toilette of the lady herself. Vases filled with artificial flowers—a few good pictures in handsome but not gaudy frames—a French time-piece in *or-molu*—several little ivory statues, six or eight inches high, and exquisitely carved—and a book-case containing the standard works,—these constituted the principal ornaments of the room. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate—and the wax-candles shed their lustre upon the rich crimson draperies attached to the windows.

Lounging negligently in an arm-chair, tapping his boot with the end of his slim gold-headed cane, and with his eyes fixed listlessly upon the time-piece, was a young nobleman whom we must particularly introduce to our readers.

Lord Florimel—for that was his name—had only a few months previously succeeded to the family title and estates in consequence of the sudden death of an elder brother; and although he was still dressed in mourning, his attire was of the most elegant description. But he needed no adventitious aid to enhance the natural beauty of his person. For beautiful he indeed was,—not handsome—but with that cast of countenance for which Grecian women are so justly celebrated. He was scarcely two-and-twenty years of age; and a razor had never touched his cheeks, which had all the damask and peach-like loveliness peculiar to the softer sex. His complexion was singularly fair, clear, and stainless: his nose was small and perfectly straight;—his lips were red and full—and his teeth brilliantly white and faultlessly even. His neck was long and gracefully turned—his ears remarkably small and delicate. He wore his rich chesnut hair flowing in a wavy mass over his shoulders; and as it was parted with great precision above the high and open forehead, its arrangement completed the feminine appearance of the youthful noble's countenance. His eyes were large, dark, and beaming with sensual passions, the lascivious fires of which were however subdued somewhat by the long and slightly curling fringes of deepest jet which served as a veil to temper the ardent expression of those splendid orbs.

In stature Lord Florimel was very short for a man, though he was above the middle height of woman. His form was slight—but his symmetry was complete; and nothing could exceed the delicate whiteness of his hands and the diminutive modelling of his feet. His voice corresponded with this feminine style of beauty: it was clear and melodious as a flute, sounding deliciously as that of a lovely woman to the ear. His conversation was moreover particularly choice and select: though a voluptuary, he was not a rake—and he never indulged in profane jests, oaths, or imprecations. He was addicted to the pleasures of love—but he abjured those of wine; and, disliking the society of men, he passed nearly all his time amongst females. Fickle, inconstant, and easily excited by a new and pretty face, he had all the caprices of a wanton woman. But his character did not lack generous sentiments nor elevated feelings: he could be charitable in the extreme, when the humour seized upon him—and though he never lent money to a fashionable and dissipated friend, he would drop a guinea into the hand of the poor mendicant who appeared to be a worthy object for relief.

He was unmarried, and likely to remain so: for the idea of linking himself to one woman was, in his estimation, something too dreadful to contemplate. Possessed of immense wealth, and with no parents nor elderly relatives to advise him, he devoted all his time and all his thoughts to the pleasures of love; and, extravagant in nothing else, he lavished large sums upon these objects of his desires. Mrs. Brace—the accommodating Mrs. Brace—was a very useful person to such a character as Lord Florimel; and of the dozen young ladies in her service, at least two-thirds had ministered to the passing and transitory phantasies of this nobleman.

"Well, my dear friend," said Florimel, half-rising from his seat and immediately sinking back again, when Mrs. Brace entered the room,—"I am come to consult you as usual. You see before you a man completely dependent upon your kind offices to procure him a little variety in the sphere of Venus; for I can assure you that during the last ten days, I have not encountered, either in my walks or drives, a single face that has excited a new emotion in my breast."

"Your lordship is greatly to be pitied," observed Mrs. Brace, with a smile.

"Pitied!" he ejaculated: "I am indeed! But permit me to tell you, my good friend," he continued, his eyes settling upon the milliner's ample bust, a considerable portion of which was exposed by the low corsage that was then in fashion,—"permit me to tell you that you are looking quite delightful this evening. One would scarcely believe that you could be seven-and-twenty;"—Florimel knew that she was forty;—"for your complexion is perfectly brilliant—your teeth are like pearls—your eyes flash fires—yes, fires most wanton and seductive at the

same time—and your hair is radiant in its glossy blackness."

"Is it possible, my dear Florimel," asked Mrs. Brace, with her sweetest smile,—"is it possible that you are going to make love to me by way of a change?"

"Upon my word I have very serious thoughts of so doing," responded the young noble, drawing his chair closer to that on which the milliner sate. "Ah! now I have caught a glimpse of your foot and ankle," he exclaimed; "and, in good sooth, you may well be proud ——"

"Oh! I am not conceited—I am not vain, Florimel," interrupted Mrs. Brace; for as the reader may observe, she was on very intimate terms with the youthful noble—though even while she addressed him thus familiarly, it was with an under-current of respectful deference in her tone and manner.

"Neither vain nor conceited, my dear friend?" repeated Florimel: "then you are deserving of the highest commendation—for, as sure as my Christian name is Gabriel, you have every reason to be proud of your personal appearance. A happy man was Mr. Brace when he first led you to the altar——"

"My lord, you are bantering me!" exclaimed the milliner, speaking in so severe a tone and starting with such galvanic suddenness that Florimel, who had been gazing intently upon her foot and ankle, raised his eyes in amazement to her countenance, on which the colour was coming and going with a rapidity of transition that indicated the working of strong emotions in her bosom.

"My dear friend, have I angered you?" asked the young nobleman, taking her hand. "You are well aware that I am incapable of wounding your feelings wantonly——"

"Yes—yes, my lord,—I believe you," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "It was a sudden indisposition—a pang shooting through the head, and which ruffled my temper——"

"Then you forgive me for any indiscretion that I may have committed by so silly an allusion to your late husband?" said Florimel, not altogether believing the story of the sudden indisposition. "However, we will change the conversation," he added, observing that Mrs. Brace darted upon him a look so strange and sinister that it made him feel uneasy. "Let us go back to the object of my visit. I was telling you, my dear friend, that for the last ten days or a fortnight I have not encountered a new face deserving a sigh or worthy of a tender emotion; and it struck me that you might have it in your power——"

"I think that I can put you in the way of an adventure alike original and agreeable," observed Mrs. Brace, who had by this time recovered her wonted equanimity and affability.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Speak—I am dying to hear your explanations."

"Have a little patience," said the milliner, now again smiling sweetly; "and you shall know everything in good time. A certain gay gentleman of my acquaintance has discovered in a secluded wilderness two of the fairest flowers that ever graced the earth with their presence."

"Sisters, doubtless?" observed Florimel, interrogatively.

"Yes—and of a beauty eclipsing all the brilliant charms that dazzle the eye in the circle of fashion," continued Mrs. Brace. "One of these delightful creatures I have already seen—indeed, to speak candidly, she is at this very moment beneath my roof——"

"You are determined to wheedle me out of a hundred guineas to-night!" exclaimed the young nobleman, his cheeks flushing and his eyes beaming with licentious fires.

"Nay—the elder sister is already disposed of," returned Mrs. Brace. "While we are now conversing together she is receiving her first lesson in the school of Venus: but the younger sister shall be yours."

"And is the one whom you thus promise me, as charming as the other?" asked the youthful voluptuary.

"I have not seen her yet," responded Mrs. Brace: "but I am assured that she is equal to her sister—and if this be the case, it strikes me that your lordship will have at length found an object on whom your affections will probably settle for a considerable period."

"You enchant me!" ejaculated Florimel. "When and where can I see this angel?"

"Permit me to give you a brief but necessary explanation," said the milliner. "These sisters are the children of a poor but respectable and highly connected gentleman, who is at present away from home. Octavia, the elder, has already fallen into good hands;—Pauline, the younger, may belong to you. Octavia of course believes that her lover intends to marry her: whereas I need scarcely inform you that nothing is farther from his intention. Last night he declared his affection—to-night she has met him in this house: you may therefore imagine that her heart is very susceptible of the tender passion. It is fair to presume that Pauline may be won with equal ease;—and no one is better calculated to achieve such a conquest than yourself."

"I shall undertake it with all the ardour of a most impassioned wooer," exclaimed Lord Florimel.

"Nay—I have thought of a scheme by which the fortress may be surprised and the victory won with ease," observed Mrs. Brace. "Moreover, the adventure which I propose has in it something so romantic—so truly original—so *piquant*, to use a French expression—that I am certain beforehand of the delight with which you will enter into it."

"My curiosity is even painfully excited," cried the young voluptuary.

"Do you not think that you would look well in female attire?" demanded Mrs. Brace, surveying him with an arch smile.

"Oh! now I comprehend you, my dear friend!" exclaimed Florimel. "It will be delicious! A young lady—separated from her mother in a crowd—lost her way—late in the evening—dreadfully alarmed—implores an asylum for the night——"

"Excellent!" cried Mrs. Brace. "Your lordship enters fully into the spirit of my meaning. And now that I have thus far gratified your curiosity, my dear Florimel, you will perhaps grant me your patience while I make a few very necessary observations in connexion with these charming sisters. I have already told you that a certain gay gentleman, to whose kind patronage I am as much indebted as to your own, has won the affections of Octavia, the elder: but as cogent reasons will prevent him from visiting her at her own abode when the father returns home, he is naturally desirous that she should consent to meet him here as frequently as it may suit his fancy to receive her. It would however be a difficult task for Octavia to remain long and often absent from home, without having the company of her sister;—and I have therefore concluded that in order to secure the connivance of Pauline in Octavia's love intrigues, it is absolutely necessary that Pauline herself should be led into a similar adventure. The two sisters will then make confidants of each other—and, by acting in concert, they will set the watchfulness of the father at defiance."

"Most admirably reasoned!" exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Each sister being provided with a lover, they cannot reproach each other, but will mutually assist in the delightful intrigues! I must therefore presume that Octavia's gallant has already recommended you to provide a lover for Pauline; and that you have honoured me with the preference."

"Octavia's admirer consulted me upon the subject just now, before his fair one arrived," answered Mrs. Brace: "and he left it to my discretion to manage matters in such a way that his intrigue with the young lady should be enveloped in as much mystery and shrouded in as much security as possible."

"Then I presume that he is a man of rank, and married to a jealous wife?" said Florimel.

"He is a man of rank, and shortly to be married," responded Mrs. Brace. "But you know that I never mention to the gentlemen of my acquaintance anything that regards each other. 'Honour and secrecy'—that is my motto, Florimel."

"I am well aware how discreet you are on those points, my dear friend," observed the young nobleman; "and you will give me credit for a total absence of curiosity relative to the affairs of other people. Little does it matter to me who or what Octavia's lover is, so long as I possess the charming Pauline. But you have not yet told me when I am to commence the pleasing adventure which so much suits my fancy."

"In all probability to-morrow evening," answered Mrs. Brace. "I will however send you a line in the

the morning to relieve you from suspense on that head."

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "Bid your messenger wait a few minutes—he shall not return empty-handed."

"You are always generous, my dear Florimel," said the milliner, with one of her sweetest smiles. "Shall I offer you a glass of wine?"

"No—I seldom drink anything stronger than coffee or richer than chocolate," observed the voluptuary, rising from his seat: then, as he surveyed himself complacently in the mirror over the mantelpiece, he said, "Verily and truly I do believe that I shall look uncommonly pretty, when dressed in female attire. But who is to preside over my toilette?—who will arrange my hair?" he demanded, turning abruptly towards the milliner, as the idea flashed to his mind.

"I am afraid that it will prove imperatively necessary for me to enact the part of lady's-maid," answered Mrs. Brace, laughing.

"I could not desire a more charming *cameriste*," said Florimel, passing his hand gently over her somewhat buxom cheek—a liberty which the worthy lady did not in the slightest degree resent.

The young nobleman then took his leave, Mrs. Brace attending him as far as the passage leading into the house behind: and when she parted from him, a domestic in handsome livery escorted his lordship to the door opening into St. James's Square.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POCKET-BOOK.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the moment when he had succeeded in reaching the George and Blue Boar in safety, after his escape from the dungeon in the eastern district of the metropolis.

On gaining his chamber at the tavern, he hastened to examine the pocket-book which had fallen into his possession in so remarkable a manner: for although it was now three o'clock in the morning, and the commercial traveller was exhausted with the fatigues of the night, his curiosity was such that he could not retire to rest until he had completely gratified it.

Fortunately the materials for a fire were already laid in the grate in his bed-room; and applying a light to the faggot whereon the coal was piled up, he soon created a blaze that imparted a genial glow to his frame, which a few moments before was shivering from head to foot.

Seating himself in a chair drawn close to the comfortable hearth, Mr. Page proceeded to the inspection of the pocket-book. It was old—very old,—stained with grease in several places, and worn away at the edges. The strap, or fastening, was torn off; and it was tied round with a riband so faded and dirty that it was impossible to conjecture of what colour it had originally been.

Carefully laying the pocket-book open upon the table, the commercial traveller found that it contained several papers, very much soiled, worn, and dingy;—and these he examined one after another.

The first appeared to be a small packet, enclosing something soft and elastic to the touch; and on unfolding the two or three pieces of stained and mouldering paper in which the contents were wrapped, Page drew forth a long tress of hair. Though the dust had penetrated to this relic, which was neatly braided, it was nevertheless easy to perceive that the hair was of the darkest hue, and that it was soft as silk; and when the commercial traveller unrolled it carefully in his hands, it measured upwards of two feet in length. Yes—the jetty hue and the velvet softness remained to that hair: but the shining glossiness, which the idea inevitably associated with such a tress, had been dimmed and deadened by the hand of Time!

Having contemplated for several minutes that relic which appeared to tell of the loves and hopes of fond hearts in by-gone and better days, the commercial traveller minutely examined the papers which had enveloped it; and on the innermost one he at length succeeded in decyphering the following words, which the lapse of long, long years had all but obliterated:—

"*Hannah Lightfoot, her hair. St. James's Street. December*, 1756. *For her well-beloved.*"

Page started with surprise: for it will be remembered that on the evening when we first introduced him to our readers, in the commercial room at the George and Blue Boar, he related an anecdote, or rather alluded to a rumour, in which the names of George III and Hannah Lightfoot were coupled.

The discovery of this tress, which had no doubt belonged to the beautiful Quakeress of former times, served therefore to give a sharper zest to a curiosity already powerfully excited; and having restored the hair to its several envelopes, he lost no time in examining the next paper which he took from the pocket-book.

This was but a mere scrap—and, on minutely scrutinizing it, the commercial traveller discovered that it was a memorandum one half of which was wanting. It seemed as if the fold where the paper was doubled up, had so completely worn away that the document had parted in two, one portion whereof Page now held in his hand. But where was the other moiety? Vainly did he search amongst the contents of the pocket-book: the missing half was not there!

Disappointed and vexed, Page now addressed himself to the task of decyphering the writing on the piece that remained: and after some degree of trouble,—for the traces of the ink were so deadened by time that they appeared only of a dingy brown in some parts and of a light dirty yellow in others, while the paper itself was so discoloured and brittle that it seemed as if it had been scorched at the fire,—the commercial traveller succeeded in making out the following fragment, written in a bold masculine hand:—

"Take notice, all ye whom it
men, by these presents, that I
Wales, do hereby declare and a
and solemnly consider to be my
heaven and before God, the lik
Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, te
all my heart and with all my so
tenderly, and devotedly loveth
heart and all her soul: and kno
it may concern, that I do solem
myself, before God and in the si
when the will of the Almighty
august and well-beloved father
assent and most gracious permi
of my marriage with the under
or, in case of perseverance in th
grieves me,—then, on my acces

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these realms, on my sire's demi
I declare that I will, without de
—and in token that we do alrea
husband and wife, we have join
to this document, in the pre
this third day of April, One Th

"Witness,
"WILLIAM STAMFORD, Bart.

Nothing could exceed the vexation and disappointment of the commercial traveller when, having perused the above fragment, he again and again sought fruitlessly amongst the contents of the pocket-book for the other half of the paper.

That the document, if perfect, involved an important secret connected with the Court of England, he felt assured; and the circumstance that the paper was witnessed by the late Sir William Stamford, seemed to strengthen, at least in the mind of Page, the old standing rumour that there was some extraordinary mystery attached to the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard. At all events, it was clear that the commercial traveller had become possessed of relics of great interest, if not of value, in connexion with the Lightfoot family; and he began to wonder who the old man from whom he had received the pocket-book, could possibly have been.

But suddenly abandoning his conjectures, and hoping to find some clue to their elucidation in the contents of the pocket-book itself, the commercial traveller proceeded in his scrutiny thereof.

The next paper that he took up was as dingy, brittle, and soiled as the former: but the writing was more legible. It was a short note, and ran as follows:—

"*February* 9, 1757.

"I HAVE received the letter in which thou revealest to me thy princely rank. I am bewildered—dazzled—stupified. A consternation is upon me, even while I pen these few lines. But I am writing mechanically, as it were: for not an emotion stirs in my soul. All seems dead within me, save the memory of what has passed;—and that appears a dream! It is as if my feelings were lulled into an awful calm, full of dread omen and terrible presentiment. What can this mean? I know not! It is unnatural to a degree. All save my love for thee is dead within me.

"To his Royal Highness "Thine ever,
"The Prince of Wales. "H. L."

The handwriting in this letter was in the best, most fluent, and most graceful style of female penmanship; and it required not a moment's reflection to convince Page that the authoress could be none other than the beautiful Quakeress, Hannah Lightfoot.

The next paper which he took up was likewise a letter;—and its contents ran thus:—

"*February* 11*th*, 1757.

"I AM reassured, my well-beloved Prince: thy kindness hath restored me to the enjoyment of the fullest confidence. But thou art wrong to suppose that I ever doubted thine affection. No—it was not thy love concerning which my heart was filled with misgivings: it was respecting thine ability to keep the promise, that I was sorely troubled. Now I am happy—the more so that my brother knows all, and chides me not. I will keep the appointment which thou hast notified to me in thy most kind letter.

"Adieu, dear Prince, until to-morrow evening.
"HANNAH L."

The next paper that the commercial traveller took from the pocket-book, was another letter from the Quakeress, and was couched in the ensuing terms:—

"MY well-beloved Prince—my own dear, dear husband—thou wilt rejoice in the tidings which I have taken up my pen to impart. I am in the way to become a mother—in a condition which gives me the delicious assurance that I shall in due time present thee with a pledge of my undying, unalterable affection. Lady Stamford is with me at this moment: she is most kind and affectionate towards me. This afternoon I shall accompany her to the Manor: she insists upon me paying this visit to her beautiful seat near Aylesbury;—and, independently of her great friendship for me, I am the more induced to accept her invitation on account of the sympathy which now exists between us. For it was only yesterday that Lady Stamford perceived that she herself was in a condition calculated to be most pleasing to Sir William, who tenderly loves her; and when we came to compare notes, we found that we both made the same discovery at the same moment. This singular coincidence may appear trifling to dwell upon, dear Prince: but it hath made an impression on my mind. Therefore, as thou art to leave town for a few days in attendance on thine august sire, I will, with thy permission, accompany Sir William and Lady Stamford to Aylesbury—promising thee faithfully to return home again by Saturday next, to keep the appointment which thou hast so kindly given me.

"But I cannot conclude this hasty note, without renewing the assurances of my unalterable love, and thanking thee most sincerely for the kindred pledges which thou hast recorded in thy most welcome missive of yesterday. I have kissed that dear letter a thousand times: I shall kiss it ten thousand times more ere we meet again, although our separation be but for a few days.

"Ever thine affectionate, loving, and devoted wife,
"*June* 23*rd*, 1757. "HANNAH."

This letter appeared to contain a startling proof of the marriage of the Quakeress with George III, when he was Prince of Wales. Page referred again to the fragment to which the name of Sir William Stamford appeared as a witness: but he could not satisfy himself as to the date of the year which it bore. Nevertheless, he conjectured that this date must be 1757; and in this case, that fragment might be taken as a clue to the momentous incident filling up the gap between the letter dated February 11th and the one dated June 23rd.

Being eager, however, to pursue his research into the extraordinary contents of the pocket-book, the commercial traveller devoted but a very few minutes to conjecture and surmise, ere he resumed his investigation. Accordingly, taking up another of the papers, he read as follows:—

"*Stamford Manor, January 6th*, 1758.

"HEART-BROKEN—distracted—devoured by grief, I arrived here at eleven o'clock last night. O heaven! that such should be my wretched—wretched fate! Thou hast never loved me—no—thou hast never loved me! I see it all now—my God! I see it all! Wherefore must this eternal separation take place? Hast thou no regard for the feelings of her who is about to become the mother of thy child? Alas! I know not what I write—my tears blind me—my brain is on fire. I fancy that I am going mad! But pardon me—pardon me for these reproaches! I will not erase them—I will not burn this letter, and commence a new one—because I wish that thou should'st perceive how very, very unhappy I really am! Write to me, my husband——No! I must never more call thee by that endearing name——Nevertheless, write to me—write to me!"

This note was without signature; but it was in the same handwriting as the others that bore the name of the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot.

"January 6th, 1758," mused the commercial traveller, as his eyes dwelt upon the date at the head

of the letter: "that would be about the period when she must have been in daily expectation of becoming a mother. And she was perhaps confined at Stamford Manor? Ah! everything tends to corroborate the rumour respecting the mystery attending the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard Stamford. Well, it will be hard if these papers do not serve my turn in some way or another. They are worth buying up, I should think—and who knows but that Mr. J. H. Page may shortly become a rich man? But who could the old man in that miserable chamber have been?—who was that Julia whom he invoked so passionately, and who appeared to have abandoned him in the hour of his dissolution? Fool that I am to ask myself questions to which no power of conjecture or skilfulness of surmise can possibly suggest satisfactory replies! Let me finish my examination of the pocket-book first—and think over the matter afterwards."

With these words, muttered to himself in a musing tone, the commercial traveller took up another letter; and he was somewhat surprised and startled, when he found that instead of bearing the slightest relationship to the affair of Hannah Lightfoot, it was addressed to no less a person than *Joseph Warren, at the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown.* This document bore the Aylesbury post-mark on the outside; and the contents were written in a fluent, mercantile hand. The paper itself, though soiled and greasy, was comparatively quite new: the date of the epistle was very recent;—and the ink had not lost its blackness.

Page hastened to read this letter, which ran as follows:—

"*March* 17*th*, 1794.

"The terms are accepted. A Bank-note for a hundred pounds is enclosed in this letter. You will acknowledge the receipt thereof, directing your reply, as heretofore, to Mr. M——, putting 'private' in the corner outside the letter. We will take three thousand in the first instance, and three thousand more this day six months. You will pack the *goods* up in a square deal box, the boards of which must be at least three-quarters of an inch thick; and the lid must be well nailed down. Book it per carrier; and print '*C. and Co.*' in the corner of the card of address. On receipt of the box, the other hundred pound note shall be duly forwarded."

Page was for some time at a loss to conjecture the meaning of this cautiously-worded letter, which had not the writer's name appended to it: but all of a sudden the reminiscence flashed to his mind that Sir Richard Stamford had alluded in his narrative to a *certain former transaction* which his villanous partners had had with Joe the Magsman, and which related to spurious coin;—and a second glance at the letter convinced him that it referred to this affair.

"Yes—'tis as clear as daylight!" thought Page. "There's the Aylesbury post-mark;—Mr. M—— means Mr. Martin: the word '*private*' was to be placed on the address of the Magsman's reply to prevent any of the clerks in the bank from opening it. The *goods* meant spurious *guineas.* Ah! the scoundrels—they're deep enough, God knows! The coin was to be packed in just such a box as that used by London bankers to remit specie — and '*C. and Co.*' stood for *Coutts and Company.* Egad! I see it all. The thing was so managed that when the box arrived at the bank, the cashier would receive and open it in the usual way, under the impression that it had really been sent from Coutts's. Well, the business was superbly done—and those fellows Martin and Ramsey are the cleverest rascals I ever heard of in all my life. But I shall not befriend Sir Richard the less on that account—and this letter will form a link in the chain of evidence against his partners. Now let us see what we have next?"

Thus speaking, the commercial traveller took up another paper, which was a short note in a neat female hand, but bearing no resemblance to the writing in any of the documents which he had previously read. Its contents were as laconic as they were mysterious:—

"*July* 7, 1794.

"THE next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening. "L. L."

The envelope which had contained this note was not amongst the papers in the pocket-book; and Page was therefore unable to ascertain to whom it was addressed.

Two papers only now remained to be examined. One was a blank sheet folded in the form of a letter; and although Page held it up to the light and scrutinized it in all possible ways, he could not discover even the slightest trace of writing, nor any sign that the paper had ever been written on at all.

The last item in the contents of this singular pocket-book, was a scrap whereon the ensuing lines were scrawled with a pencil evidently guided by a tremulous hand:—

"LOOK under the stone in the farthest corner to the right, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia—and you will prosper: act rashly—and you will be ruined."

With the perusal of this laconic and mysterious note, ended the commercial traveller's investigation of the pocket-book; and having locked up the documents safely in his trunk, he retired to rest, to dream of the Magsman—Hannah Lightfoot—Sir Richard Stamford—the old man who gave up the ghost in his presence—and, in a word, all the incidents of the last few hours.

But when Mr. Page awoke between nine and ten o'clock, he became painfully convinced of the fact that he had caught such a severe rheumatism from the dampness of the dungeon where he had been confined, as to render him utterly incapable of rising from his bed. His legs appeared to be completely paralysed; and his body ached all over, as if he had been soundly thrashed with cudgels.

Under these disagreeable circumstances, he was compelled to remain in bed and have medical advice without delay—while a messenger was despatched to Wood Street to inform Messrs. Hodson and Morley of his return to his quarters at the George and Blue Boar, and likewise to caution them (if it were yet time) not to send the ransom-money to the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRINCE OF WALES.

AT about the same hour that Mr. Page awoke to the consciousness of an excruciating rheumatism in all his limbs, the following scene took place in Carlton House.

Picture to yourself, reader, a spacious bed-chamber, magnificently furnished and fitted up in the most luxurious style,—with a carpet so thick that the feet sank into it as if they were treading on soft sand—and with draperies so ample and rich that the casements were impervious to even the slightest breath of the sharp wintry air.

The couch stood upon a dais or raised platform, which was approached by three steps;—and the curtains, of satin and of gold brocade, flowed down from a canopy of purple velvet adorned with a plume of ostrich feathers.

By the side of the bed there was a night-table of rose-wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl; and on this were placed two or three bottles of soda-water, a bottle of hock, a small decanter half filled with brandy, a crystal jug containing the pure element, and several tumblers.

The toilette-table, which stood between the two windows nearest to the bed, was of the most elegant description. A large mirror, set in a gold frame, was fixed on supporters at the back, in such a manner that it could be moved to suit any light prevailing in the room, or any attitude which the individual consulting the glass might choose to take. There were two dressing-cases—both of the finest gold; and the smaller one was embellished round the edges with precious stones. To judge by the number of razors—tooth-brushes—combs—hair-brushes—nail-scissors—tweezers for removing superfluous hairs from the nose—boxes of dentifrice—jars of pomatum—perfumed soaps—phials of fragrant oil—bottles of scent—and cosmetics of all descriptions,—a stranger would have imagined that this dressing-table was spread for the use of at least a dozen persons: whereas all that luxury of the toilette was prepared for a single individual!

On a large oval table in the middle of the chamber, lay a miscellaneous collection of articles which to some extent bespoke the tastes of their royal owner, and in other respects served as an index to that wanton extravagance which lavished the gold wrung from the very vitals of the toiling millions, as if it were so much dross to be had for the mere trouble of stooping to pick it up. Boxing-gloves, foils, small swords, and single-sticks,—riding and hunting-whips, gold and silver spurs, new bridles, jockeys' caps, and two or three pairs of white leathern tops for boots,—fowling-pieces, duelling-pistols, rifles, powder-horns, shot-belts, and new flints for the locks of the fire-arms,—a pile of indecent pictures just imported from Paris, and the more calculated to inflame the imagination because the designs and the colouring were executed with an artistic perfection and a natural truthfulness well worthy of better subjects,—several elegantly bound books, the contents of which would bring a blush to the cheeks of even the inmates of a brothel,—a quantity of China monsters, which were much in vogue in those days and fetched an immense price,—watches, rings, breast-pins, stars, orders, and diamond garters, all heaped pell-mell as if they were things of no worth,—exquisite specimens of the beautiful art of carving in ivory, displayed in miniature figures representing the most eminent actresses of the age,—curious articles of *virtû*, such as old coins, fragments of weapons used by the Ancient Britons, pieces of pottery dug up from the ruins of a Roman villa, and even Catholic relics for which enormous sums had been given,—innumerable letters and *billets-doux*, from a countless host of ladies, and all scattered in the greatest confusion, some of them indeed never having been read, while out of others peeped locks of hair,—such were the principal items in that miscellaneous collection which covered the table in the centre of the room.

On a cheffonier placed between two of the windows, stood a large and remarkably handsome writing-desk, of a dark wood inlaid with golden ornaments of exquisite and very curious workmanship; and the lock was contrived in such a manner that no other key would fit than the one specially made for the purpose. This key the Prince invariably wore fastened to a thin but strong chain underneath his waistcoat: for the desk contained papers of great importance.

To the walls of the chamber were suspended several pictures, all painted by eminent men, but all most voluptuous in the subjects which they represented. Lucretia struggling in the arms of Tarquin,—Cleopatra pillowing the head of Mark Anthony upon her naked bosom,—Mars and Venus ensnared in the invisible net which Vulcan had spread upon the couch of their amorous dalliance,—the beautiful Andromeda bound in a state of utter nudity to a rock, and left as a prey to the monster from which Perseus rescues her,—Ariadne wandering in an equally primitive condition on the shores of Chio, when abandoned by Theseus,—a beautiful woman struggling in the lascivious embraces of a Satyr,—these were the principal subjects of the pictures.

In addition to the door by which this royal bed-chamber was usually entered, there were two others. One communicated with a private staircase, to which we shall have to allude more than once in the course of our narrative: the other led into a bath-room fitted up with oriental splendour, and adorned with full length mirrors in every direction. Voluptuous ottomans, a buffet covered with wines and delicious beverages, vases filled with perfumes, and an atmosphere warmed by artificial means, rendered this bathing-place so perfect in its luxury, that the most fastidious and the most difficult to please could not find a single fault.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, as we have already intimated, when the Prince of Wales awoke in the sumptuous couch which stood upon the dais in the bed-chamber. Opening his eyes languidly, his Royal Highness pressed his hand to his brow—for he had sate up until a late hour, and had imbibed a sufficiency of curaçoa-punch to leave behind the evaporating fumes even a far more racking head-ache than he now actually experienced.

Raising himself indolently in his bed, the Prince poured some hock into a large tumbler—then emptied therein the contents of a bottle of soda-water—and drank the delicious beverage ere its effervescence had time to subside.

In a few minutes the Prince consulted an elegant gold repeater set round with brilliants; and finding that it was close upon ten o'clock, he rang a bell by means of a silken cord which hung between the curtains and the wall.

A French valet, dressed in plain black, but with the greatest neatness and precision, and whose age was about thirty, instantly answered the summons.

"Germain," said the Prince of Wales, "the morning is very cold—is it not?"

"Very cold, your Royal Highness," answered the dependant, who spoke English without the slightest foreign accent.

"Then light the fire," continued the Prince.

This command was immediately obeyed; and in a few moments the flames went rushing up the wide-mouthed chimney with a cheerful sound.

"Tell me, Germain," said George, after a pause,—"was I very particularly drunk last night? Speak candidly now—and without any nonsense."

"Your Royal Highness was certainly not sober," responded the valet, in a submissive tone.

"Damn the sobriety!" ejaculated the Prince, impatiently. "I know perfectly well that I was far from sober—but I wish to be informed whether I was helpless or incapable."

"I had the honour of supporting your Royal Highness hither," said Germain.

"And of putting me into bed—eh?" cried the Prince.

"I experienced that honour likewise," answered the valet.

"Then I must have been damnation drunk—and there is no longer any doubt upon the point," said George. "But this soda-water lies disagreeably cold upon my stomach: give me a little drop of brandy, Germain."

This order was obeyed—and the Prince swallowed the dram with a relish.

"Now unlock the door leading to the private staircase," continued the Prince: "I am expecting Mr. Meagles—and he will breakfast with me."

"Your Royal Highness will take breakfast in bed?" observed the valet, interrogatively.

"No—I shall rise and have a bath first," was the reply. "But you will not serve up breakfast until eleven—and in the meantime I shall not want you."

Germain unlocked the door communicating with the secret stairs, and then withdrew.

In two or three minutes the sounds of voices, mingled with subdued laughter, reached the ears of the Prince, who started up in his bed, muttering to himself in a tone of vexation, "That damned fool Meagles is up to some of his tricks again—and yet I enjoined him to come alone!"

Scarcely had he thus given vent to his annoyance, when the door which Germain had so recently unlocked, was opened—the velvet curtain covering it, was thrust aside—and a gentleman made his appearance. But instead of immediately advancing to pay his respects to the Prince, he held the drapery back from the door until the person by whom he was accompanied had likewise emerged from the secret staircase and had entered the chamber.

But ere we allow these new-comers to proceed a step farther, we must tell the reader something about them.

First and foremost, then, we introduce to public notice Mr. Timothy Meagles, or, as his friends called him, plain Tim Meagles. He was an individual of about thirty years of age—short in stature, of slight and dapper build, but endowed with great physical strength. His face was marked with the small-pox: but he had expressive blue eyes, a fine set of teeth, and an enormous pair of well-curled auburn whiskers—so that he could not be pronounced positively ugly. It is true that his hair was of a fiery red, and that there was something coarse, if not actually vulgar, in the expression of his countenance: nevertheless, he was not without his admirers amongst the fair sex—and when he rode his splendid iron grey in the Park, he received a gracious bow from more than one lady of quality. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen of fashion he was a special favourite,—not merely because he was known to enjoy the friendship of the Prince, but likewise because he was a very good fellow in many ways. For if any one required a second in a duel, to whom could he better apply than Tim Meagles?—if an umpire were wanted at a prize-fight or a pigeon-match, who was more competent than Tim Meagles? Behold him on the race-course—or out with the hounds—and it would do your heart good to contemplate the spirit with which the sport was entered into by Tim Meagles. Again, who could sing a better song or make a more fluent speech after dinner, than this gentleman of such numerous qualifications?—who could drink his three bottles of wine and make more sure of going home sober than Tim Meagles? His taste was as excellent in the choice of wines as his judgment was unquestionable with regard to horse-flesh. He could drive a four-in-hand or a tandem with equal proficiency: at steeple-chases he performed such wonderful feats that it appeared as if himself and his horse were possessed of a hundred lives apiece;—and in swimming, leaping, running, boxing, fencing, wrestling, and all kinds of gymnastics as well as manly sports, Tim Meagles was unapproachable by any of his friends or acquaintances. He was moreover reckoned a crack shot with either gun or pistol; and in respect to the "laws of honour" he was a peripatetic code.

But these qualifications, numerous though they be, do not make up half the sum of those possessed by Mr. Timothy Meagles. He was a most convenient and useful personage to the Prince of Wales, who in many instances would not have known what to do without him. Did his Royal Highness get into a scrape with the friends of some lady whom he had seduced, Tim Meagles was employed to hush the matter up:—did the illustrious spendthrift require money, Tim Meagles was indefatigable in his search after some capitalist to advance a loan:—and on more occasions than one had this same universal and ubiquitous agent conveyed the Prince's plate or Mrs. Fitzherbert's jewellery to a certain celebrated pawnbroker in the Strand. In fact, Tim Meagles' services were as varied and numerous as his qualifications or his resources. He was never at a loss for the means of carrying out anything which he undertook: his ingenuity in concocting plans was only equalled by his perseverance in pursuing an object until its final attainment. Nothing could daunt his courage or damp his spirits; and the greater the obstacles he had to encounter, the more energetic became his mode of action. It was all the same to him whether he had to console a forlorn and deserted fair one, or to thrash a bailiff; and his tact in hushing up a love affair was as admirable as his skill in appeasing a clamorous creditor.

The Prince not only retained him as an able instrument, but liked him as a good fellow and a pleasant companion; and it was sufficient that he thus patronised Tim Meagles, to induce all the friends and acquaintances of his Royal Highness to treat that useful individual as an equal. It was true that Tim loved a lark above all things, and did not much mind on whom he played off his practical jokes: but no one dared to frown on one who basked in the smiles of royalty;—and thus Mr. Meagles was not only tolerated in fashionable life, but actually courted.

At the time when we introduce him to our readers, he had been about three years on this footing of in-

timacy with the Prince, who had picked him up at some race-course. What he was previously, we are at present unable to state: but this much we can aver in his favour—that however poor his origin might have been, he never boasted of either birth or wealth; —indeed, he possessed no ostensible source of income, beyond the remuneration which he received from the Prince and the money he picked up by betting, gambling, and similar pursuits. At the same time, no one could utter a word against his character; although prudent fathers and mothers who possessed marriageable daughters, did not look very well pleased if the young ladies happened to flirt with Mr. Timothy Meagles.

Such was the gentleman whom the Prince was expecting to breakfast on the morning of which we are writing. But who was the companion of Mr. Meagles on this occason? We will enlighten our readers on that point, and then pursue the continuous thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN AMAZON.

About thirty-five years previously to the date mentioned at the opening of this tale, a certain Letitia Fluke was born in a miserable attic in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's. As she grew up, she became remarkable for the beauty of her person, the masculine energy of her character, and the profligacy of her morals. Seduced by Rann, the celebrated highwayman who bore the *sobriquet* of "Sixteen-String Jack," she lived with him as his mistress for some time; and being endowed with extraordinary intelligence, she taught herself not only the rudiments of a good education, but likewise acquired the facility of expressing herself with grammatical accuracy and conversational elegance. After passing through various gradations, she married Sir John Lade, a wealthy and amorous baronet who was old enough to be her grandfather; and, on becoming Lady Letitia Lade, she soon wheedled herself into that sort of society at the West End which may be described as "not over particular." Her great personal beauty, splendid figure, easy virtue, and proficiency in all the sports of the field rendered her a special favourite with the dashing noblemen and gentlemen about town; and her reputation as a huntress was second only to that of her friend Tim Meagles as a hunter. She rode exquisitely—was always one of the foremost in at the death—and could leap a five-barred gate or practise any of the most daring feats characteristic of steeple-chasing.

This lady was it whom Meagles had brought with him to the Prince's room on the present occasion. She was however dressed in male attire, which became her admirably; and had it not been for the extreme fulness of her bosom, which was so firm and plump that no art of compression and no tailor's skill in respect to the frock-coat could conceal its voluptuous exuberance, she would have been taken by a stranger for a man of rather effeminate appearance. As it was, she looked like a modern Diana the Huntress: for she had spurs upon her boots and carried a riding-whip in her hand—and her form, though robust and vigorous, was admirably symmetrical, while all her movements were characterised by a graceful ease. Nothing could exceed the elegance of her costume. The hat, with its broad brim, set off her handsome countenance to the greatest advantage; and when she removed it on entering the chamber, her magnificent black hair showered in a myriad glossy ringlets over her broad and sloping shoulders. The blue frock-coat, braided most elaborately in front, fitted close to her form, developing the contours of her swelling hips, and giving a wasp-like appearance to the waist; while the grey small-clothes and the polished hessian-boots, with their tassels and spurs, completed an attire at once tasteful and becoming. Being tall in stature, Lady Letitia had a masculine air, and enacted the part of "the man" to perfection—the robust proportions and straightness of her limbs, with the solid firmness of the flesh, giving a fulness of shape to her entire person and rendering ample justice to the excellent "fit" of her garments.

Having admitted his disguised companion into the royal bed-chamber, Tim Meagles closed and locked the door by which they had thus entered; and bursting into a hearty laugh as he approached the couch, he exclaimed, "My dear Prince, you seem to stare at my friend here, as if you had never seen him before in all your life."

"And who the devil is it?" demanded his Royal Highness, sitting up in bed, while his countenance wore an expression which showed that he was half inclined to be angry. "Why! by heavens—'tis a woman," he exclaimed, as Letitia advanced towards him: then, his features expanding into a smile, he said, "Ah! my beautiful huntress—I recognise you now! Well, I suppose Meagles has brought you to breakfast with me—and this is an unexpected pleasure."

"Your Royal Highness is very kind thus to receive me," returned Letitia, her smile revealing a set of large but brilliant teeth. "It was not my fault—Meagles would insist upon bringing me—and your Royal Highness knows what a harum-scarum fellow he is."

"Egad! I was quite sure that you would be welcome," exclaimed Meagles, taking up a foil from the table and making a sham thrust at her ladyship. "Only conceive," he added, turning towards the Prince, who was surveying with gloating eyes the fine form of the huntress;—"I met our fair friend here as she was coming from her morning's ride——"

"I was just about to put up my horse in the stables in King Street," interrupted Lady Letitia: "for I went out alone for a good scamper at daybreak—and when I came back, there was not a groom nor even a boy in attendance to take the animal from me."

"Well—and I offered to unsaddle him for you," said Meagles.

"But I did it for myself while you were thinking about it," responded the lady, as she gave her friend a real lash with her riding-whip in acknowledgment of the sham thrust he had made at her.

"Don't spare him!" cried the Prince, laughing heartily as Tim Meagles vainly cut a caper to avoid the blow. "But had I anticipated the pleasure of your company, my dear Letitia, I would have risen to receive you. Indeed, I ordered Germain not to make his appearance with breakfast until eleven, though I knew that Meagles would be here at ten—

[OCTAVIA CLARENDON.]

because I had resolved to take a bath in the interim."

"Treat me just as if I were one of your own sex," exclaimed the lady; "and have your bath, by all means. Here—I will give you your dressing-gown and slippers," she continued, throwing the former upon the bed and placing the latter in a convenient position on the carpet by the side of the couch.

"And you mean me to rise in your presence?" asked the Prince, laughingly.

"Why not?" demanded Letitia. "You do not suppose that I shall go home and tell the baronet that I have had the honour of assisting at the toilette of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales?"

"Egad! you are quite capable of telling your husband anything," exclaimed Meagles, putting on a pair of boxing-gloves and attacking an imaginary antagonist in a most scientific fashion.

"You are very brave in buffetting the empty air, Tim," said Lady Letitia: "but if you really want some one to spar with you, I don't mind gratifying you in that way;"—and, as she thus spoke, the Amazon threw down her riding-whip, and thrust her hands into a pair of pugilistic gloves.

"This is excellent!" cried the Prince, leaping from his couch, and putting on the figured silk dressing-gown and the embroidered morocco slippers which the lady had placed within his reach.

But while he was thus employed, the huntress had turned her back towards him, inasmuch as she had commenced a regular sparring match with Tim Meagles, who very complacently allowed her to buffet him about to her heart's content—though, had he chosen to exercise his skill in the art of self-defence, she would never have had a chance of even hitting him a single blow.

Presently Tim Meagles began to retreat rapidly—then he darted aside with an abrupt movement—then he leapt and capered all about the room, in

order to weary his fair antagonist—both of them highly enjoying the sport, while the Prince of Wales was equally amused as a spectator. At last, the humourous Meagles put an end to the fun by suddenly dealing Lady Letitia a blow on the forehead, which knocked her flat down upon her back; but she rose laughing heartily, and throwing aside the gloves, declared that she had had enough of boxing for the present occasion.

"Now we'll take a little drop of brandy, my brave Amazonian friend," exclaimed Meagles; and filling a couple of wine-glasses, he handed one to Lady Letitia, who tossed off the contents without winking. "By the bye, I quite forgot you, my dear Prince," observed Tim, turning towards his Royal Highness. "Shall I pour you out a thimblefull?"

"No—not at present, Meagles," was the reply. "I have had my hock and soda-water, and a dram to sink it—and I therefore think that I shall be able to manage very well until after breakfast. But now for my bath," added the Prince, gathering his ample dressing-gown round his somewhat portly form, and descending from the dais.

"I envy your Royal Highness the possession of a bathing-room contiguous to your sleeping-chamber," said Lady Letitia. "I must positively make Sir John have one fitted up for me," she added, exchanging a rapid glance of intelligence with Meagles.

"Have you ever seen my bath-room?" inquired the Prince.

"Only as I catch a glimpse of it now through the half-open door," responded the Amazon. "Your Royal Highness must recollect that this is the first time I have had the honour of being admitted to your private apartments."

"And it need not be the last," observed George, bending upon her a significant look: for although he had known the lady for two or three years, she had never struck him as being so handsome as she appeared on the present occasion.

"There, now!" cried Meagles, who had been pretending to be very busy in examining the lock of one of the Prince's rifles for the last two or three minutes; "I knew that your Royal Highness would not be displeased with me for bringing Lady Letitia hither this morning."

"Displeased!" ejaculated George: "I am delighted! But will you inspect my bath-room before I enter it?" he asked, turning again towards the lovely Amazon.

"Before you enter it?" repeated the lady, as if she had not heard aright. "Why should you stand upon any such ceremony with me? I cannot succeed in persuading you to forget that my attire is unsuited to my sex."

"It becomes you admirably, at all events," observed the Prince, advancing close up to the huntress, who was leaning negligently against the toilette-table: then, proffering her his hand, he said, "Permit me to show you my bath-room."

"Oh! with much pleasure," exclaimed Lady Letitia. "It will perhaps afford me a hint for the establishment of some humble imitation at my own town-residence."

Thus speaking, the Amazon accompanied the Prince into the adjacent chamber; and when he closed the door behind him, she affected not to perceive the incident.

"Well, upon my word, your Royal Highness possesses a perfect oriental bathing-room," she observed, throwing herself on one of the voluptuous ottomans and surveying the place in a leisurely and altogether unembarrassed manner: "it is really a delightful scene — exquisitely fitted up — and evincing in every detail that fine taste for which your Royal Highness is so justly celebrated."

"I am pleased that you admire my bath-room," said the Prince, seating himself by her side. "Can you not for the moment fancy that you are in some apartment attached to the harem of a Turkish palace?"

"Never having been in the Mussulmans' country, I cannot precisely make so free with my imagination," answered the huntress, in a lively tone. "At the same time, from all I have read, I could, without a very large stretch of the fancy, conceive your Royal Highness to be a Sultan in *deshabillée*," she added, with a significant glance at the Prince's figured silk dressing-gown and embroidered red morocco slippers.

"I am perfectly willing that you should entertain such a belief, on condition that you permit me to exercise my fancy with regard to yourself," exclaimed George, his eyes wandering amorously over the voluptuous form of the huntress.

"Oh! certainly—I cannot have the least objection," she cried,—"especially after having compared you to the Grand Turk. And now tell me, pray, for what you are inclined to take me?"

"For my Sultana of an hour," responded the Prince, throwing his arms round Lady Letitia's neck and imprinting a dozen kisses upon her lips.

"You are determined to make me feel that I am a woman, in spite of my male attire," she murmured, the fires of a lascivious nature flashing in her eyes.

"And that you may have nothing to sustain the delusion relative to your sex," responded the Prince, "I will remove this invidious frock."

With these words, he began to unfasten the lady's attire; and she, nothing loth, permitted the royal voluptuary to have his own way.

We must however leave the Prince and the huntress in the bath-room, and return to Mr. Meagles, who, at the moment when they were quitting the bed-chamber, was to all appearances very busily engaged in examining the miscellaneous articles strewed upon the central table.

Nor did he desist from his occupation as soon as he found himself alone: for he thought it probable that the Prince might return to fetch something, or to give him instructions relative to the exclusion of any one who might seek admission to the bed-chamber. He accordingly remained at the table, and began to examine the indecent French prints, which he had not seen before, as they had only arrived on the previous day. They were not however much to his taste; for Tim Meagles was too ardent and impassioned a votary at the shrine of Venus to need any stimulant of the kind for the purpose of exciting his imagination. Besides, he had a certain important object in view, and which engrossed his thoughts: he therefore turned the prints over in a listless manner, and very shortly passed from them to the inspection of the fire-arms. These he scrutinized with less abstraction of mind—for there were several new fowling-pieces and pistols which he had not seen before.

But when about a quarter of an hour had elapsed,

he reflected that Lady Letitia Lade must have had ample time to play off the artillery of her charms upon the voluptuous Prince, or that his Royal Highness himself must have succeeded in conquering any affected scruples on her part; and, advancing on tip-toe to the door, he stooped down and peeped through the key-hole. His eye commanded a full view of the interior of that luxurious retreat;—and, behold! the Prince and the Amazon were wading about in the same bath —disporting, like a merman and a mermaid, in the spacious pool of tepid and perfumed water. The numerous mirrors reflected and multiplied their forms—or rather their busts, which appeared above the level of the bath; and so enchantingly beautiful did Lady Letitia appear, with her black hair streaming over her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, that Tim Meagles, although he had long been on terms of the most tender intimacy with her, was for a moment annoyed at himself for having purposely brought her to Carleton House on the present occasion with the view of throwing her into the arms of the Prince.

But this feeling of jealousy was as evanescent as, under the circumstances, it was absurd; and it was instantaneously succeeded by a lively satisfaction, as he thought to himself, "She has played her cards admirably—and she will succeed in engrossing the Prince's attention during the half-hour that I enjoined her to be sure and keep him engaged!"

Thus rejoicing in the success of a pre-arranged stratagem, Tim Meagles stole noiselessly away from the door of the bath-room; and advancing to the royal couch, he took from beneath the pillow a long, thin gold chain to which a key of very peculiar workmanship was attached.

He then approached the writing-desk to which we have already alluded; and having carefully opened it, he proceeded to examine several small packets of papers, which were tied round with pink riband, and bore endorsements indicative of the various matters to which they respectively referred. But while thus occupied, he more than once cast an anxious look towards the door of the bath-room:—his apprehensions were not however verified by any sudden interruption on the part of the Prince.

His search in the two compartments of the desk lasted for upwards of ten minutes, there being numerous packets of papers, which he examined one after the other until nearly the whole were thus disposed of—and still he had not lighted on the particular parcel which he sought. He now began to fear that it might not be in the desk at all:—and yet he knew full well that the Prince kept every document of an important or private nature there. But, as it frequently happens in such cases, the very last packet which Tim Meagles drew from the desk bore the endorsement that he had hitherto so vainly sought; and having secured this little parcel about his person, he re-arranged all the others—locked the desk—and restored the key to its place of concealment under the pillow of the couch.

For a few moments a smile of triumph played upon the lips of Tim Meagles: but it almost immediately yielded to that calm, free-and-easy, and independent expression which was the natural characteristic of his features. Drawing a large arm-chair close to the fire, he deposited himself indolently in the luxurious seat, and lighted a cigar.

In a few minutes the door of the bath-room opened, and Lady Letitia came forth, followed by the Prince. The former had resumed her male attire; but her hair, the natural gloss of which was enhanced by an artificial brilliancy in consequence of its immersion in the water, would have betrayed the fact that she had entered the bath, even if Tim Meagles were not already acquainted with it.

Not a blush appeared upon the lady's cheek—not the slightest embarrassment marked her manner, as she emerged from the voluptuous bathing-room: but Meagles turned an arch look upon the Prince, exclaiming, "Well, are you displeased with me for having brought our Amazonian friend this morning?"

"Hold your tongue, Tim," cried the lady, laughing. "Ah! I thought I smelt the delightful flavour of the weed. I will keep you company with a cigar, while the Prince dresses himself—and then for breakfast. I already feel as hungry as a hunter."

"Or a huntress—which?" observed Meagles.

"Both," replied Lady Letitia, throwing herself upon a chair opposite to her humourous friend: then, taking an elegant ivory case from the pocket of her frock-coat, she drew forth a little Spanish cigarette, which she lighted by the aid of Meagles' full-flavoured Havannah.

A quarter of an hour was thus whiled away by means of smoking and chattering; and in the interval the Prince of Wales had made such improvements in his toilette that he now appeared in an elegant deshabillée. Germain shortly afterwards entered the room, bearing a large silver tray containing the breakfast-things;—and although he observed Lady Letitia and instantly recognised her, he nevertheless affected to take no more notice of her presence than if she were a phantom visible only to the Prince and Meagles. For Germain was a very discreet Frenchman: otherwise he would not have long held the post of *valet intime*, or rather "confidential gentleman," about the person of the Prince of Wales.

An elegant breakfast was now served up, and to which both Lady Letitia and Tim Meagles did ample justice: but George had indulged over-night too liberally in curaçoa-punch to be able to eat with any degree of appetite in the morning.

"You don't seem to be peckish, my dear Prince," observed Meagles, as he committed a second and very desperate assault upon a cold partridge pie.

"You made the punch too strong last night, Tim," answered his Royal Highness.

"Egad! I should have thought that the bath would have put you all to rights," exclaimed Meagles, with a sly look first at the Prince and then at the Amazon.

"I shall owe you a grudge, Tim, if you indulge in any impudent allusions," said Lady Letitia, smiling, and making a jest of her profligacy.

"I will be upon my good behaviour, my dear," observed Tim. "By the bye, my dear Prince," he continued, turning towards his Royal Highness, "I missed you from a quarter to six to nearly half-past ten last evening——"

"And you are very likely to miss me for precisely the same period *this* evening, Mr. Meagles," interrupted the Prince, suddenly assuming a tone that had just sufficient haughtiness in it to serve as a

tacit intimation that the subject was not to be dwelt upon.

"Then, instead of taking an early dinner with your Royal Highness, I shall fasten myself upon the hospitality of our Amazonian friend here," remarked Meagles, who understood the hint to abandon the delicate topic which he had touched upon, but who did not choose to appear disconcerted by the reproof that he had received.

"But I shall expect you at midnight, Tim," exclaimed the Prince, resuming his familiarity of manner as suddenly and as easily as he had thrown it aside for a momentary purpose: besides, it would not at all have suited his views to quarrel with an agent who was invaluable to him. "You and I shall be alone together to-night, Tim," he continued: "and then I will explain to you a little service that I require at your hands."

"Well, I don't mind promising to be here at midnight," said Meagles, who never chose to let it appear that he was servile in his attendance upon the Prince, or that he was a mere toad-eater constantly ready at the beck and call of his illustrious patron. "And now," he exclaimed, pushing away his plate, "we will have a drop of kirchwasser after this famous breakfast."

Thus speaking, he filled three liqueur-glasses with the potent cordial; and Lady Letitia tossed off her dram with as much real *gusto* as her two companions.

Shortly afterwards the Amazon and Tim Meagles took their departure by the private staircase; and the Prince of Wales rang the bell to desire the attendance of his secretary with the morning's newspapers and letters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAULINE.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening—and Pauline was seated by the fire in the front parlour of the villa. She was not merely alone in that room—but likewise in the house: for the charwoman had taken her departure some hours previously, and Octavia had been absent since five.

We do not pretend to know—at least for the present—what excuse the elder sister had made for thus leaving home for two evenings running, and for several hours on each occasion; but certain it is that Pauline was well satisfied, and entertained not the least idea of the real motive of Octavia's proceedings.

And now she was seated by the fire, as above stated, and occupied with her needle—not on fine work, but in the repairs of the household linen: for although our readers may smile at our minuteness of detail in this respect, we can assure them that we have only mentioned the circumstance in order to enhance their good opinion of the charming girl who thus sought to make up by her own thrift for the slenderness of her father's income. And as Pauline's tall and elegant figure was slightly inclined over her occupation, and the cheerful light of the fire streamed with Rembrandt effect upon her lovely countenance, she appeared far more interesting and attractive than she would have done if lounging on a luxurious sofa, attired in the richest style of fashion, and embellished with artificial ornaments. For not more beauteous in its glossy luxuriance would have seemed that dark brown hair, though sparkling with gems: not more fair nor polished would have been that brow, though crowned with a tiara of diamonds; — nor more pure and stainless would have appeared that white neck and virgin bosom, though adorned with brilliants worth a monarch's ransom.

Softly—how softly! did her long black lashes seem to repose on her fair cheeks, as she sate with her deep blue eyes fixed upon her work:—rich with the hues of health, and delicate with the purity of a taintless complexion, were the cheeks whereon those lashes rested:—and, oh! how beautiful was the entire countenance!

Gracefully rounded, too, were the plump white arms, as Pauline plied her needle with the tapering fingers, the rosy nails of which were as exquisite in their almond shape and as well cared for as if they belonged to a Duchess.

There was a smile of sweet contentment upon the moist red lips, which were just so slightly parted by that angelic expression as to afford a glimpse of the teeth that were faultlessly even, stainlessly perfect, and white as the pearls of the east;—and from between those lips came the sweet breath as if from the dewy leaves of the rose, and mixing in balmy fragrance with the air.

When, ever and anon, she raised her eyes from her work, they appeared radiant in their very softness: for no infelicitous reflections—no stormy emotions—no harrassing thoughts were harboured in her bosom, which, in its full and rounded contours, heaved and fell with gentle and regular respiration.

Such was the charming creature against whose innocence and whose peace an infernal plot was already in train: and now do we tremble for thee, thou beauteous Pauline!

It was, as we said, about seven o'clock on the evening in question, when a loud and impatient double knock at the front door startled Pauline from her work; and she hastened to answer the summons, her heart fluttering with the hope that it was her father who had returned.

But she was disappointed in this respect: for a young lady appeared upon the threshold; and the moment Pauline opened the door, the stranger said in an anxious and appealing tone, "May I beseech you to grant me refuge for a few minutes and to shield me against the insults of ruffians in the garb of gentlemen?"

Pauline gave a ready assent to the prayer; and the stranger was instantaneously admitted into the parlour.

This apparent young lady was in reality no less a person than Lord Florimel; and, thanks to the taste and ingenuity of Mrs. Brace, his disguise was complete. His rich chesnut hair was curled into a thousand ringlets that showered from beneath an elegant gipsy hat over his shoulders; and the black silk gown which he wore, came high up to the very throat and was artistically padded in the corsage. The ample shawl was arranged with the utmost precision; and Florimel's feet and ankles appeared femininely diminutive in the silk stockings and neat boots which encased them. Altogether, he seemed and acted the well-bred lady to perfection.

Pauline hastened to place a chair near the fire for his accommodation; and then, resuming her own seat, appeared to await any explanatory remarks hat he might choose to offer.

Florimel affected to be greatly agitated; and Pauline not only begged him to lay aside his bonnet, or rather gipsy-hat, but actually rose and unfastened the ribands with her own hands. Then, as the young nobleman felt the fingers of the beauteous girl touching his cheeks, and her form coming in contact with him as she thus rendered her aid to one whom she believed to be of her own sex, his blood began to circulate like lightning in his veins; and as he gazed up at the heavenly countenance which bent over him, while her very breath fanned his face, he experienced feelings of a softer, more tender, and purer nature than he had ever known before.

The bonnet was laid aside; and Pauline, as she resumed her seat, could not help thinking what a beautiful head of hair her visitor possessed. Moreover, there was something in Florimel's appearance which enlisted her sympathies in his favour; and as she cast a rapid glance at his pleasing features, she thought that she beheld in them the indications of many engaging and amiable qualities.

"I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness towards me," said the young nobleman, rendering his naturally melodious voice as femininely subdued in tone as possible. "But what can have become of my dear mother?" he exclaimed, suddenly re-assuming an air of painful agitation. "Surely those rude people cannot have ill-treated her?"

"Compose yourself, my dear young lady," said Pauline, rising from her seat. "I will cheerfully go and look for your mother ——"

"Not for worlds, sweet Miss, would I have you stir out on my account!" interrupted Florimel. "There are several insolent men, who appeared to be very tipsy, parading up and down the road; and they pursued my mother and myself for a considerable distance. At length they rudely assaulted us —and we were separated. I fled in affright—hastening I knew not whither—and so bewildered and confused that I did not observe for several minutes that I was alone. You may conceive my terror when on stopping short, breathless and exhausted, I found that my mother was lost to my view. At the same instant I heard rapid footsteps approaching—and, dreading farther outrage, I ventured to seek a refuge in your house, where I perceived light gleaming through the shutters. That refuge you have generously accorded;—and now suffer me to become acquainted with the name of my kind hostess, that I may mention it again with gratitude elsewhere."

"My name is Pauline Clarendon," was the answer. "I regret that my father should be absent in the country—for, were he here, he would speedily consign to the hands of justice the insolent brawlers who have thus outraged you."

"Permit me, my dear Miss Clarendon," said the nobleman, who had thus acquired the assurance that her father was *not* at home,—"permit me to proffer you my friendship and solicit yours in return. My name is Gabriel Florimel ——"

"Oh! what a charming name!" ejaculated Pauline, quite involuntarily. "Gabrielle Florimel," she repeated in a musing tone, and with that stress upon the final syllable of the Christian name which showed that she took it in the feminine gender.

"Yes—Gabrielle Florimel," said the nobleman, instantly adopting the same pronunciation, which consisted merely in laying a stronger emphasis on the *el*. "I am delighted that you are pleased with my name. Yours is not less beautiful—Pauline Clarendon."

"Pardon me, Miss Florimel," said the young lady, hastily, "for having been so thoughtless and frivolous as to dwell on a name, when I should be thinking how I can best aid you in your present embarrassment. You will not permit me to go out and look for your mother? It is true that I am unacquainted with her person—but if she be wandering about in search of you, she might accost me to ask if I had seen any one answering your description ——"

"I again repeat, my dear Miss Clarendon," interrupted Florimel, "that I should never forgive myself if I allowed you to venture abroad and incur the chance of receiving such insults as those from which I have escaped. No—pray remain at home —and permit me to stay with you a little while."

"With infinite pleasure, Miss Florimel," said the amiable Pauline. "But your mother—will she not be uneasy?"

"She will hasten home, making sure that I have gone thither," answered the young nobleman. "But it is a long way off—in the immediate vicinity of Blackheath—and I tremble at the idea of returning all by myself into such a lonely neighbourhood. The hackney-coachmen are all connected with robbers and bad people ——"

"Do not distress yourself, my dear Miss Florimel," said Pauline, in a voice expressive of deep interest: for the wily nobleman had made these observations in such a melancholy and plaintive tone that the generous-hearted Miss Clarendon was profoundly touched by the apparently painful embarrassment in which her new friend was involved.

"I thank you sincerely for your sweet sympathy," returned Florimel: "but how am I to act?"—then, after a few moments' seeming reflection, he said, "If I only knew of some respectable lodging-house in the neighbourhood where I could obtain a bed ——"

"Oh! if that be all," interrupted Pauline, in the most cheerful tone that ever expressed a winning hospitality of disposition, "your difficulties are at an end. There is a spare-bed in this house at your service, my father being absent; and my sister, whom I expect home at about eleven, will be as much rejoiced as myself to harbour you as a guest."

"Your kindness is such that I know not how to find words sufficient to acknowledge it," observed Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at the success which his stratagem was thus experiencing step by step. But when he fixed his eyes upon the lovely being seated opposite to him, and read all the goodness of her heart in the lineaments of her candid and ingenuous countenance,—and while the musical tones of her sweet voice yet sounded in his ears, and her gay and innocent smile appeared to beam upon him with a species of heavenly influence,—a sudden pang shot through his breast at the idea of the black treachery of his present conduct.

But, thrusting aside these unpleasant reflections, as a man brushes off a loathsome cob-web from the leaves of a charming rose which he desires to pluck, the youthful voluptuary continued the discourse in a cheerful tone.

Playing his part with the utmost caution, he

measured every word that he uttered—calculated every look that he threw towards her—and studied every attitude that he assumed and every movement that he made: so that not once—no, not even for a single instant, while they thus remained seated together in the parlour, did Pauline suspect that her agreeable and fascinating companion was otherwise than as represented.

Indeed, so well pleased were they with each other, that three hours elapsed ere they fancied that even one had passed away since the first moment that they met.

It was now ten o'clock—and Pauline prepared supper, of which they partook together; and thus the time was again whiled rapidly away, until eleven. Then the young lady began to grow anxious for the return of her sister: but Florimel was perfectly certain that Octavia would *not* come home until the morning! He accordingly affected to be getting sleepy, in the hope of inducing Pauline to retire to rest without delay; and she proposed to conduct her new friend to the spare-chamber, observing that she must sit up to await her sister's return. Florimel apologised for his drowsiness, and declared his intention of keeping her company in her vigil:—and thus another hour passed.

Midnight struck—and still Octavia came not.

"You are uneasy respecting your sister?" said the disguised nobleman, in a soothing tone.

"She promised to return by eleven, at the latest," answered Pauline.

"Perhaps something of importance may detain her?" suggested Florimel, anxious to elicit, if possible, the nature of the excuse which Octavia made for her absence.

"It may indeed be so," said Pauline, in a musing tone. "She went out shopping yesterday evening; and as she was passing along Oxford Street, she saw an elderly lady run over by a hackney-coach. My sister was the first to hasten to the assistance of the sufferer, who happened to live close by. Octavia accordingly aided her to reach her home; and the lady besought her to remain with her for a few hours. This request was granted; and it was past eleven when my sister returned home. This evening she thought it would be but courteous and humane to call and inquire after the patient; and as the old lady dwells entirely alone, Octavia foresaw that she would ask her to pass a little time with her. She however promised to come back by eleven at the latest; and now," added Pauline, glancing uneasily at the watch which Mrs. Smith had given her, "it is a quarter after twelve."

"My dearest Miss Clarendon," said Florimel, "there is nothing in your sister's prolonged absence to make you uneasy. I can readily understand the cause of it. The elderly lady is all alone, you tell me—and she is perhaps worse. Your sister, who is no donbt as kind-hearted as yourself, will not abandon the sufferer in such cruel circumstances; and she very naturally concludes that you will not fail to conjecture the reason of her absence."

"Oh! thank you for thus suggesting an explanation," cried Pauline, her countenance brightening up. "Yes—it must be as you suppose: at all events, I will not compel you to sit up any longer on my account."

"And as your sister is not here," said Florimel, with a palpitating heart, "there is no necessity for us to separate even though we retire to rest."

"If you do not object to take Octavia's place by my side," responded Pauline, with artless cheerfulness, "I shall be delighted to have you as a companion."

With these words, the ingenuous and unsuspecting maiden secured the front door and led the way to her bed-chamber.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VIRGIN AND THE VOLUPTUARY.

As Lord Florimel followed the beauteous Pauline up the stairs, that pang which had already smitten him, again shot through his heart: for the reader will remember that we have described him as being by no means naturally deficient in generous sentiments;—and now that his atrocious perfidy seemed to be approaching its consummation, those finer feelings that lay crushed and subdued beneath the influence of voluptuous passions and selfish desires, suddenly put forth a latent power. But it was when he crossed the threshold of the virgin sanctuary and the door of the bed-chamber was closed behind him,—it was *then* that his remorse became invested with a horror such as he had never known nor experienced before.

Sinking upon a chair, he pressed his hand to his brow as if to steady the thoughts that were racking his brain: and Pauline, observing his emotion, though very far from suspecting the cause, smoothed down his hair with the unpremeditated manner of one who offers a tender sympathy,—observing at the same time, "My poor friend, you feel unhappy at the idea of passing the night beneath a stranger's roof."

These words, falling upon the ears of the young nobleman in all the silver melody of Pauline's sweet voice, and the simultaneous contact of her warm hand which swept over his forehead, produced an effect upon him as if lightning had been suddenly poured into his veins: and, taking that hand, he pressed it to his lips in the rapture of a passion which the unsuspicious maiden believed to be a grateful friendship.

"No, my dearest Pauline," he said,—"for you will permit me to call you by your Christian name, as I must henceforth be Gabrielle to you,—I am not unhappy on account of this temporary absence from home: indeed, I rejoice at the incident, disagreeable in itself though it were, which drove me to seek an asylum beneath this roof—inasmuch as it has made me acquainted with you. We have not known each other quite six hours—and I already feel that I love you as a sister."

"We will be friends, Gabrielle," responded the artless Pauline. "I have often longed to possess a sincere and dear friend—one of about my own age, and whom I could take a fancy to at first sight: for as my sister's ideas and thoughts so completely correspond with my own, we never have anything now to say to each other—no little confidences to impart—no advice mutually to seek——"

"I understand you, my dear Pauline," interrupted Florimel, enchanted at the turn which the conversation was taking; "and I can assure you that I have often felt just as you describe. Yes—I have longed to form a friendship with some young lady of about my own age——"

"How old are you, Gabrielle?" asked Miss Clarendon.

"Guess," returned Florimel, smiling in his sweetest manner.

Pauline surveyed the disguised nobleman attentively for nearly a minute, and then said, "I should conceive you to be about one-and-twenty."

"No—I am only nineteen," answered Florimel, determined to make his years correspond as closely as possible with those of his lovely companion.

"That is exactly my age!" exclaimed Pauline, with a delight so frank and real that it was almost childish. "Yes—yes," she continued, in the same joyous tone, "we will be friends—bosom friends, Gabrielle—will we not?"

"Till death!" replied the nobleman. "And now let us seal our friendship with a kiss."

Pauline bent down to him as he still remained seated on the chair; and as she pressed her moist lips to his, he could scarcely prevent himself from flinging his arms around her and straining her to his breast.

"Now let us think about retiring to rest," said Pauline; "and we will talk ourselves to sleep," she added gaily.

With these words she proceeded to lay aside her gown; and when Florimel beheld her lovely form set off in all its fine contours by the corset that rather took its shape from those charms than gave any symmetrical improvement to them, his passion was inflamed almost beyond the power of control. Burning desire struggling with a consciousness of the paramount necessity of prudence—an intense fervour raging in spite of the certainty that any abrupt declaration of his sex would ruin his project—an ardent longing to throw himself at her feet, proclaim his love, and implore her to have pity upon him,—such was the turmoil of emotions that now agitated within the breast of Lord Florimel!

Placing herself before the glass, and having her back turned towards him, Pauline began to arrange her hair for the night. Having unloosed the shining masses, which now flowed in silken waves over her naked shoulders, she combed out that luxuriant covering which might have been envied by the proudest empress that ever wore a diadem upon her brow.

"My sweet Pauline," said Florimel, impatient to give their conversation such a turn that he might gradually prepare the maiden's mind, as it were, for the *denouement* of this adventure, "is it not strange that we should have experienced precisely the same views and the same thoughts relative to the necessity of a sincere and tender friendship in order to complete our happiness?"

"It proves that our dispositions are congenial, and that there exists a strong sympathy between us, Gabrielle," returned Pauline.

"And yet perhaps the ideas and reflections of one of us have been more developed by circumstances than those of the other," observed Florimel.

"I do not understand you, my sweet friend," said Pauline, who was still occupied in combing out her beautiful hair before the glass.

"I alluded to myself," continued the young nobleman, heaving a profound sigh.

"Ah! you appear to be unhappy!" exclaimed Pauline: "and now I remember that when we first came up-stairs, something was annoying you. Have you anything preying upon your mind? If so, it were wrong to keep it a secret from me, after the vows of friendship which we have exchanged."

"You shall possess my entire confidence, dearest Pauline," said the disguised nobleman. "The first secret that I have to reveal to you is this——I love!"

"And are you unhappy on that account?" inquired the young maiden, in a tone of tender interest. "But perhaps you are not loved in return?"

"I know not," responded Florimel, throwing a deep melancholy into his voice: "I hope—and yet I fear!"

"Doubtless the object of your affection is very handsome?" said Pauline.

"Not handsome — femininely beautiful — very beautiful!" exclaimed Florimel, with all the effusion of a worship. "But tell me, my dearest friend—have you yet known what it is to love?"

"Never," answered Pauline.

"Then are you unacquainted with a source of the purest and most ineffable delight," said the youthful voluptuary: "or I should rather describe it as a deliciousness of the feelings—a paradise of the emotions——"

"Wherefore, then, are you unhappy, Gabrielle?" inquired the artless girl.

"Oh! love is a pleasing pain—or a painful pleasure—I know not how to describe it!" exclaimed Florimel. "It is something that encourages the most heavenly hopes, throughout which there nevertheless runs an under-current of fears;—and yet these fears are not exactly what you would describe as gloomy apprehensions—they are rather an exciting influence, seldom or never sinking into despondency. Thus, when I tell you that I am unhappy because I *fear*, I should likewise avow that I am happy because I *hope;* and such a strange, undefinable sentiment is love, that these contradictory feelings—these opposite sentiments are experienced by the soul at one and the same time!"

"'Tis singular—most singular," observed Pauline, in a musing tone: "and yet I think that I can fully understand what love must be."

"Friendship often ripens into love," said Florimel.

"You can scarcely say *often*, my dear Gabrielle," returned Pauline; "because it is very seldom that friendship ever subsists between a young lady and a young gentleman who are not related to each other."

"Nevertheless, such is the case with regard to myself," observed Florimel. "A sincere friendship exists between me and the object of my love."

"And on your side that friendship has already ripened into love?" said Pauline, interrogatively.

"Yes," answered the disguised nobleman; "and if it be true that love begets love, I may yet see all my hopes fulfilled and my fears dissipated."

"Heaven send that you may, my dear Gabrielle!" exclaimed Pauline, in a tone of profound sincerity. "If I were a man I am certain that I could love you deeply and tenderly—and the more so, when I learnt that you already loved me."

"And what makes you hold this opinion, which is so flattering to me?" asked Florimel, trembling all over through very joy and pleasure.

"Because you are beautiful—extremely beautiful," said Pauline, turning round towards him; "and because you are so amiable—and good—and pleasing in your manners. Do you think, my dear Gabrielle, that I should have conceived so sudden a

friendship for you if you were not all that I represent? Oh! I am sure that you will be happy in the affection that you have formed—for to know you is to love you!"

"Dearest Pauline," murmured Florimel, in a tremulous tone, "I may repeat all your own words and apply them to yourself—for to know you is to love you also!"

"We will love each other as very sincere friends," said the young maiden; and while she was thus giving utterance to words that were the outpourings of her artless and ingenuous soul, she was simultaneously laying aside further portions of her dress—until she stood in a state of semi-nudity in the presence of the disguised nobleman, who was a prey to such varied and conflicting emotions that he was rivetted as it were to his seat.

"Yes—we will love each other as sincere friends," he said, his voice so full of profound feeling that the beauteous, unsuspecting Pauline was touched to the very soul by its soft and melodious tones; and throwing her arms round the traitor's neck, she imprinted a fervent kiss upon his forehead.

But how did Florimel restrain his feelings now?—how exercise the least control over a passion that was excited almost to madness? For by the young maiden's movement, his very countenance was brought in contact with her virgin bosom—and her naked arms encircled him.

"O Pauline—Pauline," he exclaimed, "you know not how much I love you!"

"It affords me an indescribable pleasure to receive that assurance," said the charming girl, now withdrawing her arms from his neck, and again approaching the toilette-table.

"But can you conjecture wherefore I love you so ardently?—can you divine wherefore I could fall down and worship you?" asked Florimel, in an impassioned tone: then, without waiting for a reply, he said, "It is not only because you are so beautiful and good—but it is also because you are the living counterpart of the object of my affections. Oh! if you and I love each other thus sincerely, would it not be a joyous event if some fairy could suddenly start up from the floor, and change one of us into a being of the opposite sex?"

"O Gabrielle, what a strange idea!" exclaimed Pauline, turning round towards her companion, with a sudden feeling of uneasiness springing up in her soul.

"Nay—do not reproach me, my angelic friend," cried Florimel. "You will find that I am a romantic creature, fond of giving my imagination full play, and at times somewhat dreamy and visionary. But you will bear with me in all that, Pauline—you will not chide your friend on this account! Suffer me to indulge in the delicious thoughts in the stream of which my soul was being gently borne along, and whose current leads amidst flowery scenes to the very portals of elysium. I was conjuring up a beatific vision when you interrupted me:—I was fancying that if all we have read of fairies and good genii could possibly be true, how delightful were it if one of that powerful race would suddenly appear before us—touch me with a magic wand—and say, '*Thou adorest Pauline—become a man—throw thyself at her feet—and claim her as thy wife!*'"

"Gabrielle—I implore you not to continue in this strain," cried Pauline, gazing strangely upon the flushed cheeks and flashing eyes of her companion. "You terrify me—I know not why;—and yet a vague apprehension—a feeling of increasing uneasiness has come over me——"

"Give not way to these idle fears, my beauteous friend," interrupted Florimel, whose looks were fixed upon the bosom of the virgin whom he sought to make his victim: "do you think it possible that my vision can be realised? And even if it were, Pauline, should you be vexed?—should you be annoyed? Ere now you told me that you had never yet experienced the passion of love; and I assured you, in reply, that earth's greatest happiness was, in that case, still unknown to you. But you have declared your friendship for me—and I have proved to you that friendship itself ripens into love. Now, suppose for a moment that the fairy could come forth—could touch me with a wand—could change my sex—and could endow me with a proud name and a colossal fortune,—suppose all this, my sweet Pauline,—and then imagine that you saw me at your feet—that I declared my fervent and unalterable love—that I implored you to become my wife, the partner of my rank and the sharer of my wealth,—tell me, my dearest Pauline, what would your answer be?"

Gradually as the young nobleman thus developed a theory which was in itself more or less a revelation,—a suspicion, at first faint as the ringing of far-distant bells in the ear, rose up in the mind of Miss Clarendon: then, as the idea which had flashed to her brain received confirmation from the concluding words of the nobleman, her countenance became convulsed with terror—a faint shriek escaped her lips—she staggered a few paces towards the window, her impulse being to open it and cry for help—but her limbs failed her, and she sank almost insensible upon a chair.

Florimel sprang from his seat—threw himself on his knees before her—and endeavoured to take her hand. But, with the instinctive prompting of virgin modesty, Pauline crossed her arms over her bosom;—and, bending a look full of mournful reproach upon the nobleman, she said, "You are not what you seem! Tell me who you are, and the purpose which has brought you hither?"

"Adorable Pauline," exclaimed Florimel, "the fairy has accomplished the task—and it is a devoted lover who kneels at your feet!"

The young maiden started from the chair. A profound sense of danger inspired her with sudden energy; and seizing a shawl, she hastily threw it over her shoulders, wrapping it across her bosom: then, drawing herself up to the full height of her noble stature, while her countenance, losing its expression of alarm, assumed a sovereign dignity alike interesting and imposing, she said, "Whoever you may be, I command you to leave me this moment!"

"Sooner than thus quit you—sooner than leave you mortally offended against me," cried Florimel, who had risen from his suppliant posture at the same moment that Pauline started from her seat,—"I will commit suicide in your presence! My God, have pity upon me! I love—I adore you, Pauline—and your indignation, if unappeased, will reduce me to despair."

"It is impossible that this interview can be prolonged," said the young maiden, her tone becoming a trifle less severe and her countenance losing a small portion of its inflexibility. "I again command you to leave me—as the only condition on which you may ever hope to obtain my pardon for this black treachery and cowardly outrage."

"Your words are cutting—too cutting, Miss Clarendon," exclaimed the nobleman, with quivering lips: then, in a sudden access of generous fervour, he hastily added, "But I deserve all that you can say to me—yes, I deserve it all! My conduct has indeed been treacherously black—and the outrage was cowardly. Yes—yes—you are right, beauteous maiden—and I am a villain!"

"Prove your contrition by leaving me instantaneously," ejaculated Pauline, whose gentle soul was secretly moved to pity the handsome—or rather beautiful youth whom she had already begun to love sincerely while believing that her new friend's attire was suited to the sex.

"My God! can nothing induce you to pardon me?" cried Florimel, whose agitation and excitement were very far from being feigned—inasmuch as the noble and dignified bearing of the young virgin had commanded his respect; and when such an impression is made upon a man of naturally generous feelings, remorse and compunction are certain to follow under such circumstances as those which we are detailing. "Pauline—adored Pauline," he exclaimed, clasping his hands: "hear me for a few moments! The fame of your beauty reached me—never mind by what means—and I was already in love with you before I saw you. I resolved to become acquainted with you; and my object has been thus far attained. I have outraged you—I have treated you in a manner which you have denounced in the terms properly applying to such behaviour;—and now I beseech and implore you not to cherish a lasting indignation against me! On the contrary, dearest—dearest Pauline, on my knees do I pray you to accord a single syllable of hope to the wretched being who has thus merited your anger. Or, stay—one word more," exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly drawing himself up as he was about to sink at the maiden's feet;—"you know not who I am—but I solemnly and sacredly offer you my hand

in honourable marriage—for you are the first woman that ever yet made upon my soul an impression which in its very symptoms is far different from a passing caprice or an evanescent passion. Say, then, my beloved Pauline,—say—will you consent to become the partner of my rank and fortune?—will you change your own sweet name of Clarendon for that of Lady Florimel?"

"Who are you?" inquired the maiden, bewildered and amazed. "Speak!—and deceive me not!"

"I am Lord Florimel—but still *Gabriel* to you," answered the young nobleman.

At that moment a post-chaise drove up to the front of the house; and Pauline, hastily putting aside the window-curtain, looked forth into the road.

"Gracious heaven! 'tis my father!" she exclaimed, in accents of despair, as she turned once more towards Florimel: then, clasping her hands together in indescribable anguish, she murmured, "Octavia is not at home—and I——"

"Courage!—reassure yourself!" hastily interrupted Florimel. "In the name of everything sacred, I implore you to be calm—and all shall be well!"

"But how?—what can we do?" demanded Pauline, now suddenly struck with a sense of her complete dependence upon the young nobleman to save her honour from even the faintest suspicion on the part of her father. "What can we do, I ask?" she repeated: for at that moment a loud double-knock at the door resounded through the house.

"Again I say, compose yourself," exclaimed the nobleman, speaking collectedly though with the haste occasioned by the urgency of the circumstances. "Listen to me attentively."

"I do—I do," interrupted Pauline, trembling all over like a timid dove.

"You have *two* aims to accomplish," continued Florimel: "the first is to screen yourself from suspicion—the second to save your sister from suspicion likewise."

"My God! what do you mean?" demanded the maiden, gazing in bewilderment upon her companion.

"I mean that your father will be angry if he should learn that your sister passes the night away from the house," returned Florimel, impressively. "This is what you must do—make him believe that Octavia is *here*—and prevent him from entering the chamber. Now go——"

At this instant the knocking was repeated; and Pauline, hastily enveloping herself in a cloak, hurried down stairs to open the door.

CHAPTER XX.

A NIGHT AT THE VILLA.

Mr. Clarendon was about fifty-four years of age,—tall in person, and of aristocratic appearance. His countenance was severe and even haughty in expression; and yet there was an indelible stamp of melancholy upon the lofty brow. His face was thin—his features were sharp and angular—and his complexion was sallow. His eyes were small, dark, and steadfast in their look: they were not piercing—and yet, when their gaze fell fully upon the countenance of an individual, they seemed capable of reading his very soul. His hair was of an iron grey deepening into blackness—or rather retaining its pristine hue at the whiskers, which were thin but dark: his lips were small and usually compressed, as if he were accustomed to long intervals of profound thought;—and care had traced its lines on either side of his mouth.

Somewhat spare in person, his figure was nevertheless well knit and genteel: and though it was slightly bowed, the cause was the same that had left the shade upon his forehead and had marked the wrinkles on his countenance. For his was one of those vigorous constitutions and iron frames which appear to defy the lapse of years, and which Time, as if resolved not to be defeated in its universal ravages, had therefore employed Sorrow to undermine.

We have already stated that he had done his duty as a good father towards his motherless daughters; and he loved them tenderly. It was true that misfortunes had somewhat soured his temper, and rendered him easy to be irritated: but he seldom spoke unnecessarily a sharp word to his children;—or if he did, he made amends by a deeper demonstration of affection afterwards. Naturally taciturn and reserved, he was accustomed to pass hours together in the seclusion of his own chamber; and thus the young ladies were left much to themselves and thrown upon their own resources for recreation. In a word, they were what may be termed "their own mistresses;" and even in their walks Mr. Clarendon seldom accompanied them. He entertained the fullest confidence in their propriety of conduct; and their very artlessness and inexperience were in his estimation the best proofs that his reliance upon their prudence had not been misplaced.

Having recorded these few observations, we resume the thread of our narrative.

Pauline had taken the candle with her; and Florimel was accordingly left in the dark in the maiden's bed-chamber.

She descended the stairs with precipitate haste, and opened the front door. In another moment she was clasped in the arms of her father, who exclaimed, "I have welcome news for you, dearest Pauline. But you did not expect me home so soon perhaps—nor yet at such an unseasonable hour?"

"Oh! I am rejoiced that you have returned in safety, dear father," responded the affectionate daughter, for an instant forgetting in the delight of this meeting the embarrassing circumstances in which she was placed with regard to Florimel on the one hand and her sister on the other.

The postilion now brought Mr. Clarendon's trunk into the house; and that gentleman, having paid for the hire of the vehicle in which he had travelled, entered the front parlour with his daughter.

"You will take some refreshment, dear father?" she exclaimed, observing that he looked fatigued—although his countenance was happier in expression than she had ever before known it to be.

"Nothing, Pauline, thank you. I am only wearied in consequence of a tedious journey," he continued: "for the roads are execrable with the thaw that has set in—and hence the lateness of the hour at which I have arrived. But how is my dear Octavia?"

"She is well—quite well, dear father," answered the young maiden, feeling that her countenance became scarlet and then suddenly pale as she spoke: for it appeared to her as if she were already uttering a falsehood—or at all events deceiving her sire with an equivocation.

"She is asleep, no doubt—and I will not disturb her to-night," said Mr. Clarendon, who at the instant was divesting himself of his cloak and shawl-kerchief and did not therefore perceive his daughter's emotions. "I was as much surprised as rejoiced when I saw a light in your bed-chamber—for I thereby felt assured that you had not as yet retired to rest, and that consequently I should not have to awaken you. But I suppose that you have burnt a candle all night in your own room during my absence?"

"And yet we are not very timid, you know, dear father," said Pauline evasively: and again did she blush at the part which she was playing. "But you told me that you had welcome news?" she exclaimed, anxious to turn the conversation.

"Yes—Lord Marchmont has behaved well at last," replied Mr. Clarendon. "However, I will tell you everything in the morning—or rather a few hours hence, for 'tis already long past midnight. I am myself wearied—and I will not keep you longer out of your warm bed."

Thus speaking, Mr. Clarendon embraced his daughter—took the candle which she offered him—and proceeded up-stairs to his bed-chamber, which was in readiness for his reception.

Pauline obtained another light; and with trembling limbs and palpitating heart she returned to her own room, whence she had been absent about a quarter of an hour.

But during that interval a great change had taken place in the sentiments of Lord Florimel. He had relapsed from the chivalrous noble into the selfish voluptuary; and his imagination had become inflamed with ardent desires as he dwelt upon the charms of the young maiden—those virgin charms which, in her unsuspecting artlessness, she had revealed to his eyes! He smiled when he recollected that enthusiastic admiration of her innocence and virtue, into which a sudden ebullition of generous feeling had hurried him, even to the point of offering her his hand; and the more he mentally gloated upon the loveliness of Pauline, the less scrupulous did he become in his intentions with regard to her. At length, almost maddened with the fervent thoughts that thus superseded the nobler sentiments which he had for a few moments entertained, he vowed to possess her at all risks, and to sacrifice her honour to his passion in spite of all the obstacles which her virtue might throw in his way!

Such was the state of his mind, when she reappeared:—and, although she was enveloped in that ample cloak which she had thrown on ere she descended to open the front door for her father, his imagination nevertheless retained a vivid impression of the white neck, beauteous shoulders, and well-rounded bosom which a short time previously were fully unveiled to the unsuspected licentiousness of his gaze.

The maiden placed the candle upon the table—drew the folds of the cloak as completely around her erect form as possible—and seating herself in a chair close to that which Florimel occupied, bent upon him a look so full of earnest appeal that a remorseful pang once more shot through his heart.

"My lord," she said, in the lowest tone to which her dulcet voice was capable of falling without becoming actually inaudible, "you are beneath the roof of an honest man:—respect his daughter, who feels that she is so entirely dependent upon your honour and your mercy."

Florimel contemplated her lovely countenance with eyes brimful of passion: but he knew not how to reply to the appealing words which she had addressed to him.

"Not half-an-hour has elapsed," continued Pauline, now casting down her looks, while a carnation glow suffused her cheeks, "since your lordship honoured me by a proposal which was well calculated to win my forgiveness for the perfidious conduct which preceded it. But to that offer your lordship will insist upon no reply at present. Perhaps, indeed, your lordship may wish to have leisure to reconsider it," she said, her voice becoming tremulous; "and therefore ——"

"No, my adored Pauline," interrupted Florimel, who hoped by fostering her belief in his honourable intentions that he should more easily accomplish his evil aims;—"I cannot desire to have time for reflection on that head. I love you—I adore you ——"

"This is language which, under present circumstances, I dare not listen to," interrupted the girl, firmly and proudly. "Ere now your lordship evinced a generous spirit: do not—oh! do not destroy the confidence wherewith you thus inspired me! For it was through this confidence, that I yielded to the alternative of deceiving my father instead of looking him full in the face and revealing all the incidents of the last few hours. And, oh! I blush—I feel ashamed of the duplicity of which I was guilty, when he asked for Octavia and I suffered him to believe that she was here! It was the first time that I ever deceived my father," she added mournfully: "and it shall be the last!"

"Remember, Pauline," observed Florimel, "that you have saved your sister from those suspicions which Mr. Clarendon would have inevitably entertained concerning her absence."

"But wherefore should he think ill of his own child?" demanded Pauline impatiently, though still in a low whispering tone—for her sire's bed-chamber joined that wherein this colloquy took place. "Octavia would explain in the morning the cause of that absence ——"

"No, my dearest girl," interrupted Florimel, suddenly resolving upon a new and most iniquitous expedient in order to obtain a victory over the maiden's honour: namely, by exciting her imagination with voluptuous images and conjuring up soft desires in her virgin mind:—"no, dearest girl—Octavia will *not* be able to give a satisfactory account of her long absence from home."

"Great heaven! what do you mean, my lord?" asked Pauline, for an instant yielding to the terror with which these ominous words inspired her: but almost immediately recovering her self-possession, she said with a tone and manner of mingled indignation and pride, "Your lordship dare's not asperse the honour of my sister."

"Is this a time—is this a place—or are these the circumstances, for us to veil our thoughts, or shut our eyes against palpable truths?" demanded Florimel. "I declare most solemnly, Pauline, that I would not wilfully wound your feelings: but I must speak to you as if I were your friend—or your brother—or your husband. Listen, then—and endeavour to exercise the strongest control over your emotions."

"Go on—go on," murmured the young maiden, frightened by the impressiveness of his manner and

the confidence with which he was evidently touching upon a delicate subject.

"Your sister is in love!" he said, at the same time holding up his taper fore-finger to enjoin the maiden to forbear from giving vent to the feeling of astonishment which this announcement was so well calculated to raise up in her bosom.

"In love?" she repeated, mechanically. "Impossible!"

"Sweet simpleton that thou art, my Pauline!" returned Lord Florimel, smiling. "Is it so very wonderful that Octavia should be in love?—for are not you yourself already in love likewise—and with me?"

"My lord! my lord! this pleasantry is cruel——" began Pauline, her countenance expressing mingled impatience, anger, and curiosity.

"By heaven! I never was more serious in my life, sweet girl," answered Florimel. "However, to return to your sister—I tell you that she is in love, and that she has deceived you with absurd excuses for her absence."

"Oh! if I thought that this could be true!" murmured Pauline, bursting into tears. "But, no—no," she exclaimed, wiping away those crystal drops that were tracing their pearly path down her beauteous cheeks: "Octavia would not refuse me her confidence—much less deceive me."

"One word, Pauline," said Florimel, gazing upon her with a mixture of tenderness and archness which rendered his countenance beautifully soft and feminine in expression at that moment, so that even the maiden herself, much as her mind was pre-occupied, felt her heart irresistibly attracted towards him,—"one word, Pauline!" he repeated: "and now answer me truly. When Octavia returns home in the morning, shall you frankly and unreservedly reveal to her all the incidents that have occurred during her absence?"

A blush mounted rapidly up to the virgin's pure and spotless brow; and she cast down her looks at the same time:—then, after a long pause, she raised her eyes timidly, observing in a tremulous voice, "I can understand *now* that it is possible for even the innocent and guileless heart to cherish secrets of a certain nature."

"You believe, then, at length that it is quite probable for your sister to be in love, and yet not confess her passion to you?" said Lord Florimel. "Yes, Pauline dearest—she is indeed in love;—and her lover," he added, in a melting tone and with a plaintive look, "sighs not vainly at her feet as I have been doomed this night to humble myself at yours."

"I dare not give way to the suspicion which your words have conjured up!" murmured Pauline, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out some unpleasant object from her view.

"You are passing from a state of complete innocence with regard to the world, into the noviciate of experience," said Florimel; "and you will be happier, Pauline—Oh! far happier, when there is nothing left for you to learn. Already has Octavia passed the boundary which separated her from the true enjoyments of this life—and in the arms of him whom she adores she tastes the ineffable bliss and the elysian delights of love."

"No more—no more!" exclaimed Pauline, a strange tremor agitating her entire frame.

"Hush!" whispered Florimel, placing his finger upon his lips: "remember that your father is in the next room!"

"My father!" repeated Pauline, with a shudder. "What will he say—what will be his feelings, when my lost and unhappy sister returns home in the morning—if indeed she should ever come back again!"

"Fear not—she will return," said Florimel.

"Then your lordship knows more than you have already told me?" exclaimed the maiden, her excitement every instant increasing: "you are aware of much—Oh! far too much—concerning my sister? Perhaps you were even assured beforehand that she would not come back to-night?" added Pauline, now calling to mind the readiness with which he had invented excuses in order to tranquillise her fears relative to the prolonged absence of Octavia.

"I will not attempt to conceal from you, my angel——" began Florimel.

"Again I command you, my lord, to refrain from language which it ill becomes me to hear," interrupted Pauline, recovering her maiden dignity once more.

"Then you do not love me?" said the nobleman, assuming a plaintive tone.

"Oh! I could love you—I could serve you on my bended knees—I could become your slave," returned Pauline relapsing suddenly into a state of painful excitement, as different emotions swayed her soul, even as an Æolian harp oscillates to every variety of the breeze;—"yes—and I should look upon you as a guardian angel," she added, with a feverish gleaming in those eyes usually so soft and melting,—"if you were to save my sister from incurring our father's suspicions—our father's wrath!"

"What would you have me do?" asked Florimel, his breast a prey to desires which were almost maddening, as he contemplated the lovely girl: for, in the agitation that had latterly seized upon her, and when she covered her face with her hands as ere now recorded, she had thrust her naked arms forth from beneath the ample cloak, and the licentious voluptuary was enabled to feast his eyes upon those arms so white and round.

"What would I have you do?" she repeated, suddenly noticing the disordered condition of her *deshabillée*, and once more gathering the folds of the mantle aroound her lovely form: "I would have you—if your lordship really loves me—save my sister's fault from being discovered by her father. You know where she is at this moment—I am sure that you are not ignorant on this head! No—everything you have said regarding her, convinces me that I err not in this belief! 'Tis for you, then, Lord Florimel——"

"Call me Gabriel," interjected the nobleman, now fancying that the maiden was rapidly falling into his power.

"Yes—I will call you Gabriel—my dear friend Gabriel," repeated Pauline, emphatically; for she was ready to do almost anything in order to screen her sister: "and I will never—never forget your kindness, if you will serve me in this instance. It is for you, I say, to quit this house as speedily and as cautiously as possible—to repair to the place where you know my sister to be—to insist upon obtaining an interview with her—to tell her that our father has returned suddenly, and almost unexpectedly—and to compel her to hasten home ere he shall have descended from his chamber in the morning. And

you must also assure her that I, on my part, will leave nothing unattempted or undone in order to cover her secret with an impenetrable veil. Now, my dear Gabriel, will you do all this for me——"

"And my reward, Pauline?—what shall be my reward?" exclaimed the nobleman, extending his arms towards her.

But a sudden change came over the young maiden: all her agitation—all her excitement abandoned her in a moment,—sinking down into a cold astonishment, if we may be allowed the expression;—or, in other and more explicit terms, the generous fervour of her reliance and the ingenuous warmth of her confidence in respect to Lord Florimel, received such an instantaneous shock, that she gazed upon him with the freezing hauteur of disdain and contempt, and also with the steadfastness of surprise at that abrupt and unexpected manifestation of his intense selfishness.

"You do not love me, my lord," she at length observed, in a tone indicative of profound disappointment: "nor do you even entertain the slightest particle of friendship towards me."

"Unkind Pauline! wherefore thus plant a dagger in my heart?" demanded Florimel.

"I have been deceived in you—cruelly deceived," resumed the maiden, drawing back her chair a few paces, and waving her hand imperiously to forbid the nobleman from daring to approach her: then, again wrapping her mantle closely around her, she said, "I had already forgotten the treachery with which our interview this night commenced on your side—because the discovery of that perfidious conduct was succeeded by an interval of apparent generosity on your part. Yes—I was willing to pardon the behaviour which, at one time in the course of these long hours that we have passed together, I stigmatised as black and cowardly: I was willing to forget it, on account of the contrition that your lordship seemed to manifest. And, oh! I now indeed perceive," she added bitterly, "that I am passing from a state of complete innocence with regard to the world, into the noviciate of experience—and the first fruits of this new study are sour enough, I can assure you! I thought to trust you as a friend—to confide in you as—as——"

And here her voice became suddenly choked with emotions.

"As a lover—as a husband!" Lord Florimel hastened to add. "Oh! do not lose all confidence in me, my adored one," he continued, speaking from the depths of a heart which remorse had again touched: for there was something in the dignified reproaches of Pauline that overawed the youthful libertine and compelled him to gaze upon his own selfishness in all its most ghastly and repulsive shades.

"Let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," said Pauline, who had herself undergone such a variety of feelings and emotions during the last few hours, that she received therefrom many rapidly acquired teachings in the school of experience, and from the same source had drawn an inspiration enabling her to read the more profoundly into the true character and disposition of her noble companion: "let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," she said. "A veil has fallen from my eyes—a light has dawned in upon my soul—and I already see many things differently from the view I had been accustomed to take of them. I can even understand how love may lead to error—and I pity rather than blame my unfortunate sister. Oh! yes—I feel how weak is woman, and how strong are the temptations which she has to resist. Nay—I have this night experienced those sensations which prove to me beyond all doubt that I likewise am weak, and that there have been moments during our interview when I was standing upon the verge of a precipice. But the sense of that very weakness, Lord Florimel, shall henceforth constitute my strength: a full and perfect comprehension of the dangers which beset my path, shall supply a rigid and unvarying prudence for any lack of strictly virtuous principles within me. Learn, then, that if your lordship should renew those honourable proposals which you ere now made, I feel that I can love you—aye, and devotedly: but if your lordship should dare to utter a word or make a gesture calculated to insult me, I will that moment seek refuge with my father—throw myself at his feet—confess all that has occurred—and leave *him* to punish you."

It is scarcely possible to convey an adequate idea of the effect produced on the young nobleman by this long, impressive, and dignified address. Here was a lovely virgin, of tender age, proclaiming her own weakness—acknowledging her own deficiency in that deeply-rooted principle of female virtue which a mother's delicate teachings and familiar inculcations can alone implant in the bosom of girlhood,—and yet boldly assuring her lover, into whose treacherous designs she had fully penetrated, that the very sense of her own liability to fall should be converted by her strength of mind into a fortalice of defence!

Again was his soul stricken with remorse—again did a feeling of fervent admiration spring up within him—and again did a chivalrous enthusiasm take possession of him in respect to that bright and beauteous being whose conduct was so well calculated to win the approval of a generous heart.

"Pauline—my beloved Pauline," he murmured, in a contrite tone, "you have worked a great and signal change within me. On my knees—yes, on my knees—do I implore your pardon for all that has been bad and wicked in my behaviour towards you this night."

And Gabriel sank into a suppliant posture before her as he thus spoke.

The amiable but strong-minded girl extended her hand, which he took in both his own and pressed respectfully to his lips; and she did not attempt to withdraw it. For that same experience—or rather intuitive knowledge—which had so suddenly made her sensible of the excellence of female virtue and the dangers that surrounded it, also prevented her from falling into the extreme of a ridiculous prudery.

"Do not kneel to me, my lord," she said, in a kind and encouraging tone. "Remember, I am but a humble girl—and you are a great nobleman."

"And my pride shall be to make a great lady of you, adorable Pauline," responded Florimel, as he rose from his suppliant posture and resumed his chair. "And now tell me what you wish me to do—or rather, give me your instructions, and I will obey them."

"Oh! how well could I think of your sex, were you always to adopt this demeanour towards me," exclaimed Pauline. "Now do I recognise in you everything generous, and noble, and good, which properly belongs to man."

"If I be thus changed, Pauline," said Florimel,

in a tone of sincerity, "it is your bright example that has worked so salutary an effect."

"Dear Gabriel, you know not how it delights me to hear you speak in language characterised by truthfulness and candour. You are far—oh! far handsomer, now that your features are expressive of frankness and sincerity, than when your words were fraught with guile and deceit."

"You feel, then, that you can love me, sweet Pauline?" asked the nobleman, a pure and holy delight imparting ecstatic sensations to his soul.

"As unreservedly as I declare that I shall hate you if your present behaviour change towards me, do I confess that I can love you with all my heart—even to the laying down of my life for your sake—if your real character should prove to be as I now read it."

This response commenced with a dignity that bore the most unequivocal testimony to the strength of the maiden's virtuous resolves,—and concluded with a tenderness which showed that her gentle heart was indeed susceptible of a pure and honourable love.

"Never again, dearest Pauline," observed Florimel, "shall you have cause to reproach me. And now issue your commands—that I may show my zeal and readiness in obeying them."

"You will undertake to do all I have asked in reference to my sister—my poor, lost, fallen Octavia?" said the maiden, her voice becoming tremulous with emotion.

"I swear to accomplish your wishes," replied Florimel.

"It is now nearly two o'clock in the morning," continued Pauline, after referring to her watch. "Doubtless my father is asleep—he was much wearied when he retired to rest an hour ago—and you can descend the stairs so cautiously that he will not be disturbed. At all events the trial must be made—the risk must be incurred."

Then, without any affectation of prudery,—but with a charming readiness which implied the full extent of the confidence that the maiden now placed not only in her own virtue but likewise in the altered sentiments of her lover,—Pauline hastened to put the gipsy-hat on Florimel's head and tie the ribands beneath his chin. She then assisted him to resume his ample shawl, which she herself fastened for him over his chest: and when these arrangements were completed, she observed, with an arch smile, "The next time that I have the pleasure of seeing you, my dear Gabriel, you will have the kindness to appear in the costume befitting your sex."

"You will permit me to call again soon—very soon?" said Florimel, interrogatively.

"With pleasure," was the candid reply. "But upon what pretence can you visit the house? And remember that when you do come, we must appear before my father as if we had not been previously acquainted."

"He is a relative of Lord Marchmont, I believe?" observed Florimel, after a few moments' reflection. "That nobleman is a friend of mine—and I can procure an introduction from him to Mr. Clarendon. But what explanation am I to give to your sister?"

"Precisely the same that I shall offer," responded Pauline. "I shall tell her that you came hither in disguise, and with a treacherous intention towards myself—that I detected your perfidy, and remonstrated with you upon your conduct, appealing to your generosity and your honour to depart forthwith—and that you expressed so much sincere contrition as to obtain my pardon. You then informed me that accident had made you acquainted with my sister's indiscretion, and that I implored you to rescue her from the perils into which she had fallen. But you need *not* say that you passed two hours with me in this chamber," added Pauline, with a dignified frankness of tone and manner, although a blush suffused her cheeks at the same time: "because, inasmuch as Octavia herself has yielded to temptation, it were perhaps difficult for me to escape a suspicion on her part."

"And yet, if I inform her that her father has returned home, and that his arrival took place in the middle of the night,—or rather, at an early hour in the morning," said Florimel, "she will wonder where I could have been concealed all that time."

"True!" exclaimed Pauline now much embarrassed. "And yet it is absolutely necessary that she should be prepared beforehand to meet our father," she added in a musing tone. "Oh! it is repugnant to my feelings to deal in duplicity and deceit: nevertheless, I could not endure the idea of being even suspected by my own sister——"

"Permit me to suggest an expedient," interrupted Florimel, who saw that the whole and sole difficulty to be cleared away was the fact that he had been introduced into the maiden's bed-chamber. "I will tell your sister that my interview with you took place in one parlour, and that when your father arrived you conducted him into another."

"Gabriel, I thank you for this delicacy—this generosity on your part," exclaimed Pauline, taking his hand and pressing it tenderly for an instant. "We have now no more to say to each other,—unless it be that on my side I must enjoin you to adopt such measures as to ensure the return of Octavia before eight o'clock this morning—or all will be lost!"

"You may rely upon me, my belóved Pauline," answered Florimel.

The maiden then cautiously opened the door—and the two descended the stairs together as noiselessly as possible.

When they gained the passage below, they paused and listened. All was silent; and, reassured by the certainty that her father slept, Pauline opened the street-door.

"Farewell, sweetest—loveliest girl," said Florimel, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Farewell," murmured the maiden, in an equally subdued tone.

Their lips met for a moment—the soft sound of a billing kiss broke upon the solemn silence of the night—and in another instant the front-door was closed noiselessly behind the disguised nobleman.

Pauline succeeded in regaining her chamber without disturbing Mr. Clarendon; and she retired to rest for a few hours. But the sleep that fell upon her eyes was uneasy and restless—for even in her dreams was she haunted by fears lest her sister's absence throughout the entire night should be discovered by her father.

And in those dreams did not the image of the handsome Gabriel appear to the maiden?

We believe so!

CHAPTER XXI.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

It will be remembered that Lord Florimel had by some means or other acquired the certainty that Octavia Clarendon would not return home until the morning. The fact was that when Mrs. Brace was occupied in dressing the young nobleman in the female attire suited to the evening's adventure, she had said to him, "You have now the whole night before you, Florimel: for Octavia's lover ere now intimated to me his desire that she should sleep here with him—and as her timidity may perhaps engender some scruples on this score, measures will be taken to enforce her compliance with her gallant's wishes. It is fortunate that the gentleman should have been seized with this caprice, inasmuch as it ensures your lordship an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with the lovely Pauline."

It was this speech on the part of Mrs. Brace that gave the nobleman the certainty above referred to.

As soon as he had quitted Pall Mall in his feminine disguise, the milliner rang the bell; and her lady's-maid—a handsome young woman of about twenty—answered the summons.

"Harriet," said Mrs. Brace, waiting ere she spoke until the dependant had closed the door, "I have some very particular instructions to give you. In the first place, Mr. Harley intends to remain here all night with Miss Clarendon; and he has commanded supper to be served up at ten o'clock precisely. You will of course order the cook to provide the choicest delicacies; and you will wait at table yourself—receiving the dishes on the landing outside from the footman. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, madam," was the respectful answer.

"Now take this key," continued Mrs. Brace, handing to the lady's-maid the object alluded to: "it belongs to the side-board in the room where Mr. Harley and Miss Clarendon now are; and at supper-time you will place upon the table, close to *his* right hand, the decanter of wine which you will find in that side-board. You comprehend?"

"Certainly, madam," again responded the lady's-maid. "Have you any farther commands."

"None. Oh! stay—I remember!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, suddenly recollecting a little commission which had been entrusted to her: and taking a letter from behind the ornaments on the mantel, she said, "Mr. Harley wrote this just now and ordered that it should be sent to Mr. Meagles' lodgings in the course of the evening. You will direct the footman to take it forthwith up to Jermyn Street.

"Yes, madam;"—and the abigail was about to withdraw, when Mrs. Brace again stopped her.

"You may tell Miss Walters that I am now ready to depart with her," she said, glancing at the timepiece and observing that it was a quarter past six o'clock; "and she can bring me down my bonnet and cloak. You will likewise order a coach to be sent for."

"To the shop-door, madam?" inquired Harriet.

"Certainly!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "Am I in the habit of going out by the door in St. James's Square?" she asked, somewhat petulantly.

"I beg your pardon, madam: but I was not aware for whom the hackney-coach was intended."

Having thus respectfully apologized, the abigail quitted the room.

A few minutes afterwards a very pretty girl of about sixteen, made her appearance. She was a brunette, with fine eyes, beautiful teeth, and rich red lips; and her black hair was as remarkable for its luxuriance as for its silken fineness. Though short in stature, she was perfectly symmetrical in shape; and from beneath her long cloak peeped forth as delicate a foot and ankle as the most particular *connoisseur* could wish to behold. But, alas! there was a cloud upon the beautiful face of this young creature;—and it was not the shade of the neat gipsy-hat that was set so tastefully upon her well-formed head;—but it was the sombre gloom of a deep melancholy.

Caroline Walters—for that was her name—carried in her hands a bonnet and cloak, which she assisted Mrs. Brace to put on; and, when the milliner was thus attired for going out, Harriet entered the room to announce that the hackney-coach was at the door.

"You have got everything that you want, my dear Caroline?" said Mrs. Brace, speaking to Miss Walters in a tone of remarkable kindness, and even affection.

"Everything, madam—thank you," responded the young creature; and she turned hastily aside to conceal the tears that were tracing each other down her cheeks: for though the establishment of Mrs. Brace could scarcely be called a home, yet it was the only home that this poor girl had known for two years past—and her heart was swelling ready to break at the idea of quitting it, and under such circumstances too!

"Come, Caroline—dry those tears," said Mrs. Brace, patting her upon the back in an endearing manner. "You will receive every attention and enjoy every comfort where you are going—and I shall pay you a visit as frequently as the numerous calls upon my time will permit. Besides, I shall allow you plenty of pocket-money, Caroline ——"

"Oh! my dear madam," exclaimed the young girl, now bursting into a violent fit of weeping, "there are certain things which no money can purchase!"

"Money can procure every source of happiness in this world, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, soothingly; "and you are wrong thus to give way to your grief."

"Alas! money cannot purchase peace of mind nor restore lost innocence, madam," returned Miss Walters, in a voice almost suffocated with profound sobs;—"neither can money procure oblivion for the past!"

"This is childish, Caroline," observed Mrs. Brace, but not speaking impatiently. "Remember that I will always be a good friend to you ——"

"Forgive me, dear madam, for thus yielding to my grief," said the orphan—for such indeed she was. "I know that you are my only friend. See, madam," she continued, hastily wiping her eyes, and turning towards the milliner a countenance to which she endeavoured to coax up smiles: "I am calm now—I am indeed—and I will not cry any more!"

"There's a good girl," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "All the tears in the world will not mend matters—

and you will find Mrs. Lindley a very generous-hearted and amiable woman. Come, let me see a brighter smile still upon your sweet face—and we will then depart."

"I feel quite happy now, dear madam—you have completely reassured me," said Caroline; but a profound sigh convulsed her bosom at the same time that she uttered those words in which she herself so vainly endeavoured to believe.

Mrs. Brace now made the young creature swallow a glass of wine, which imparted an immediate glow to her features and made her *seem* happy, though her heart was still agitated as the ocean after a storm.

They then quitted the room together; and as they passed through the shop, the young ladies engaged in that part of the establishment crowded round their companion to say farewell. Again the tears started into Caroline's eyes: but her friends, who were well acquainted with the reason which necessitated her temporary absence, appeared quite astonished that she should be otherwise than delighted at the prospect of a life of ease, indolence, and comfort for a few months. Poor Miss Walters did not however survey the matter in the same light as those other young ladies who had already passed through the same experiences on which this orphan girl was now about to enter.

At last Mrs. Brace and Caroline were seated in the hackney-coach, which immediately departed in the direction of Westminster-bridge, according to the instructions which the former hastily whispered to the driver.

Throwing herself back in the vehicle, Mrs. Brace drew her cloak around her: for the evening was very cold. Poor Caroline's teeth chattered, although the windows were both drawn up: but, in *her* case, the state of her feelings was of that nature which aggravated the chill without by means of the chill within;—and it was the chill that lay at the heart's core which was more icy than that of the wintry temperature!

For, Oh! bitter is the pang when all the streams of youth's fond hopes are frozen at their source,—when the fountains of the young heart's first affections are suddenly congealed at the moment that they seem to be gushing forth in their most cheerful brightness,—and when the flood of fervid feeling that was wont to bear flowers upon its moving bosom, becomes suddenly ice-bound and has naught but withered leaves sweeping with ominous rustle over its surface!

Poor Caroline!—thus was it with her;—and yet she had only just entered her seventeenth year!

The coach had proceeded for some distance without a word being exchanged on the part of its inmates, when suddenly a deep sob, which the young girl could not stifle—hard though she tried to do so—caught the ear of Mrs. Brace.

"Do not be unhappy, dear Caroline," said the lady. "Again I assure you that you will be well cared for at Mrs. Lindley's—and I shall always be your friend. But is it possible that you love ——"

"Oh! do not mention his name, madam!" cried the girl, suddenly becoming powerfully excited. "It would drive me mad! I know not whether I love him—or hate him,—whether I could kill him—or throw my arms about his neck and cover him with kisses. My God! I cannot comprehend the state of my own feelings with regard to him."

"You should study to forget him, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, assuming a solemn and impressive manner.

"That were impossible!" exclaimed Miss Walters, with a vehemence not only strange in so young a creature, inasmuch as it denoted a naturally fiery temperament,—but also contrasting singularly with the subdued, docile, and retiring manner which had characterised her a short time before.

"Impossible!" repeated Mrs. Brace, in a tone of unfeigned surprise. "And wherefore, my love?"

"Because I must cherish his image either to make it an object of worship, or an incitement to revenge," answered Caroline, her voice suddenly becoming gloomy and sullenly determined.

"You astonish—you alarm me!" cried Mrs. Brace. "I never heard you talk in so wild a strain before. For heaven's sake, compose yourself, Caroline—and give not way to such eccentric thoughts."

"Pardon me, my dear madam, if I have said aught to offend you," murmured the young girl;—and a revulsion of the heart's emotions rapidly taking place, she burst into a flood of weeping.

Mrs. Brace did not now attempt to console her: she knew that, after the excitement which the poor creature had so recently experienced, the most certain relief was to be found in a free and copious outpouring of tears.

Meantime the coach had passed over Westminster Bridge; and, in a short time turning to the right, it entered the maze of streets contiguous to Lambeth Palace.

In this neighbourhood is situate Fore Street, the houses on one side of which overlook that section of the river which lies between the archiepiscopal dwelling and Vauxhall Bridge. At the present day, these houses consist chiefly of commercial or trading establishments: but in the times whereof we are writing, there were several private dwellings in that quarter.

These buildings stood—as indeed many of the structures still stand—upon the very verge of the river's bank; so that anything thrown out of the back windows, would fall into the water at high tide. The fronts of the houses looked upon Fore Street, which was a narrow, gloomy, and lonesome thoroughfare,—not altogether enjoying the best of reputations, although no specific charge was openly made against it. But it was one of those streets where paving and lighting rates were not collected in those days, as neither one of the two purposes for which such levies are usually made was applied to this particular locality.

The five or six private dwellings to which allusion has been made, stood altogether in a row, unbroken by a single shop-front. They were old houses—with massive gables, small windows, and doors sunk three or four feet below the level of the footway, so that they were reached by a descent of steps.

All these tenements were sombre in appearance, and gave passers-by impressions irresistibly gloomy,—such as that they were inhabited by misers or misanthropes—or that some one lay dead within, awaiting the day for the funeral.

But the central house was more melancholy—more cheerless—and more sinister in its aspect than all the rest. The brick walls appeared more dingy—the heavy gables more frowning—the door more prison-like at the bottom of the steps. It was also in some points different from the others—as if the

owner or the inhabitant had positively studied to enhance the gloom which characterised it, and render its aspect more ominous and foreboding than that of its companions. For large wooden shades projected over the windows in such a way that no one looking out of those casements could possibly catch a glimpse of the sky, but must perforce cast the eyes downward,—the effect being the same as that experienced by one wearing a green shade! The real object of these overhanging contrivances was doubtless to prevent the inhabitants of the opposite houses from being able to notice what was going on in the front rooms of this particular dwelling: but in order to obtain this security against the prying eyes of the curious, the building had been invested with the gloom of a monastic establishment or a nunnery.

But as if those uncouth shades, which were painted a dull leaden colour, were not sufficient to keep out every gleam of cheerfulness that might by any accident happen to light upon this sombre abode, the inmates almost invariably had the blinds pulled down, and not unfrequently the curtains drawn. Nay, often the shutters, which were on the plan that enables them to be folded at will into the sides of the window-frames themselves, were kept closed all day in some of the rooms—aye, and for days and days together too: so that, under all these circumstances, the dark pall of funereal gloom was never lifted from off that house!

And it was here that the hackney-coach stopped: it was here that Mrs. Brace and her young companion alighted!

But when, even through the deep obscurity which prevailed at that hour and particularly in that street, the eyes of Caroline Walters were enabled to embrace some portion of this soul-chilling gloominess of appearance which we have attempted to describe, —an awful sensation came over her—a cold, slow, —and horrified shuddering, as if a clammy snake were gradually — gradually — gradually winding itself around her person, underneath her clothing!

A dizziness followed—and for a few moments everything appeared to be in a whirl;—then she felt as if she must shriek out and fall headlong into some unknown but terrible and fathomless abyss,—when she was suddenly recalled to her senses by the opening of the door, and the appearance of an elderly woman, bearing a light, on the threshold at the bottom of the descent of steps.

"Come, my dear girl," said Mrs. Brace, taking Caroline's hand: "let me introduce you to my friend Mrs. Lindley, who is here to receive you."

The young girl threw a shuddering glance upon the woman, who was endeavouring to wreath her countenance into a bland smile of welcome;—but as the light, which she shaded with her long thin hand, was thrown full upon her features, it gave them a ghastly appearance—for Mrs. Lindley's face was long, angular, and sallow.

"Come, I say, Caroline—dear Caroline!" whispered Mrs. Brace, almost in an imploring tone, as she felt the young girl's hand snatched back abruptly from her own.

Those words succeeded in somewhat reassuring the affrighted creature—for they were spoken in a tone of penetrating kindness; and she accordingly followed the milliner down the steps into the house.

Mrs. Lindley then shut the door, and conducted her visitors from the long, low, dark passage, to the end of which Caroline's straining eyes could not penetrate,—into a small parlour opening therefrom.

The shutters were closed inside the casements: the blinds were down—and the dark stuff curtains were drawn,—as if the object were hermetically to seal up those windows, so that not a crevice should afford any passer-by an opportunity of peering into the room. The furniture was of walnut-wood, and looked like ebony in its funereal dye: a few old and villanously executed steel-engravings, professing to be portraits of eminent physicians, and set in common black frames, were suspended to the wainscotting;—and in an antique book-case a few mouldy volumes on subjects of midwifery and the uses of herbs, kept company with a huge Bible fastened by means of silver clasps.

There was a good fire in the grate: but the lambent flames that rose from a pile of crackling coal, failed to mitigate the gloomy appearance of this room;—and even the large black cat, which lazily opened its sparkling, glass-like green eyes, as it lay rolled up on the hearth rug, had something ominous and foreboding about it in the estimation of the trembling, shuddering Caroline Walters.

Mrs. Lindley politely drew forward seats for the accommodation of her visitors; and then, slowly sinking down upon an easy chair with a very high back rudely carved, she put on a great pair of horn spectacles for the purpose of taking a good long survey of Caroline.

The young creature felt a disagreeable chill come over her, as the woman's small, dark, reptile-like eyes gleamed upon her through the large circular glasses: for it seemed as if a snake were endeavouring to fascinate her with its hideous gaze. And so far fascinated she indeed was, that she could not withdraw her looks from the countenance of Mrs. Lindley: they were rivetted upon that cadaverous face with its sharp features and its parchment skin—its thin pale lips and its thick and prominent eyebrows.

"She is a sweet pretty girl, my dear madam," observed the woman, suddenly turning towards the milliner, and speaking in that mysterious and subdued tone which the very nature of her profession had rendered habitual, and which she therefore used on all occasions even when commonplace subjects might have enabled her to dispense with so much caution.

"And Carry is not only a pretty girl—but a very good girl," said Mrs. Brace, in answer to Mrs. Lindley's remark. "I have assured her that she will experience nothing but the most affectionate kindness from your hands——"

"Hush! my dear madam—hush!" interrupted the woman, placing her finger upon her lip. "Not so loud, if you please! Remember that walls have ears——"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lindley—I quite forgot," returned the lady to whom this remonstrance was addressed: then, continuing to speak in a more subdued tone, she said, "You will find Caroline docile, amiable, and obliging—and therefore I am certain that you will agree perfectly well together."

"I have no doubt of it," said Mrs. Lindley. "Some of Miss Walters' companions at your establishment, my dear madam, have most likely already informed her how I am accustomed to behave to my lodgers," continued the woman, taking off her horn spectacles and smiling with mysterious significancy. "Let me see—the last that I had here from your house, Mrs. Brace, was Emily Burdett—a dear good, lively girl! She was always humming tunes from morning to night—and so I gave her the best room at the back of the house, that she might sing to the river and not to the street. Yes—a nice girl was Miss Burdett! The one before her was Rachel Forrester, I think—a fine young woman—tall and stately as Juno—and passionately fond of reading romances. Pray, are those young ladies with you now, my dear madam?"

"Oh! yes," replied Mrs. Brace: "and I rather think——"

"Hush!—what?" murmured Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward with an air of great mystery to catch the revelation about to be made, and the nature of which she could pretty well conjecture. "Don't speak too loud, mind! What were you going to say? You think——"

"That Rachel Forrester will have to pay you another visit in a couple of months, or so," added Mrs. Brace, irresistibly and also unconsciously catching for the moment a portion of that extreme habit of caution which appeared to keep Mrs. Lindley ever on the *qui vive* lest her words should be overheard by curious ears or her movements noticed by prying eyes.

"Well — well," said the woman; "these things will happen—and it makes a good trade for me," she added, with a low chuckling laugh, which was however the loudest that she ever indulged in. "Won't you take off your bonnet and cloak, and stay to supper with us?" she inquired, after a short pause, and still addressing herself to the milliner.

"No, I thank you—I must return home almost immediately," replied Mrs. Brace. "But you had better take off your things, my love," she added, turning towards Caroline.

The young girl rose from her chair and mechanically complied with the suggestion of her mistress. She unfastened the strings of her gipsy-hat, which she placed upon the table; and then slowly let her cloak fall from her shoulders. The casual observer, on glancing at the figure of Caroline Walters, would

not have suspected its robust proportions to proceed from any other cause than the vigorous health of girlhood: but the experienced eye would have instantly perceived that she was far advanced in the way to become a mother, and that unnatural means of compression had been adopted to conceal her shame up to the present moment.

She blushed deeply as she removed her cloak;—for she observed that Mrs. Lindley had at the same instant put on her spectacles again, and was once more surveying her with earnest attention.

"Sit down, my sweet child," said Mrs. Brace: "remember that this is to be your home for the next two or three months——"

"Hush!" murmured Mrs. Lindley, taking off her glasses, and raising her fore-finger significantly: "not so loud!"—then, addressing herself to Caroline, she said, "Your excellent mistress desires you to consider this house your home, until you are in a condition to leave it again;—and I cordially reiterate the assurance. Cheer up, therefore, Miss Walters—and let me observe a smile upon your pretty face."

"Yes—pray smile, Carry," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "You will soon be reconciled to your new abode—and next Sunday evening I will come and pass an hour or two with you."

"You are very—very kind," murmured the young girl, with difficulty subduing a violent outburst of grief: for, in spite of all the soothing words that fell upon her ears, she had never felt more completely friendless—lonely—and desolate in her life.

"Have you many inmates at present?" inquired Mrs. Brace of the woman to whose care the unhappy Miss Walters was thus consigned.

"Four or five," was the answer. "The place is never altogether empty, you know," she added, with that subdued chuckling laugh which Caroline shuddered to hear.

"And of course Miss Walters will find companions in them?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"In all save *one*," responded Mrs. Lindley, now sinking her tone to the lowest whisper. "But, hush!—what noise was that? I thought I heard the shutters creak——"

"No—it was only the hackney-coach moving a little outside," observed Mrs. Brace. "You were saying that there is one lady at present in your house——"

"Hush! not so loud!—walls have ears?" interposed the woman, nervously. "But the fact is that I *have* beneath my roof a young lady in reference to whom the utmost precaution and secrecy are requisite,—a young lady of high birth——hush! what noise was that?—the hackney-coach again——and she never quits her own room. Ah! 'tis a sad affair—a sad affair, by all that I can learn—and *that* is little enough. Such a sweet creature, too—of such heavenly beauty——But there is that horrid noise again——"

"It is nothing—I can assure you it is nothing," observed Mrs. Brace, impatiently.

"Hush! not so loud!" resumed Mrs. Lindley. "As I was saying, the young lady in question is the only one in whom Miss Walters will *not* find a companion."

"At all events, you will not be without society, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, rising from her seat. "And now, my dear girl, I must leave you—for I need not declare that my time is very, very valuable just at present."

"But you will come and see me soon?" exclaimed the wretched girl, throwing herself into the milliner's arms, and kissing her with that fervour which seemed to imply that the poor forlorn creature knew she was embracing her only friend.

"Yes—I will come and see you often—very often, my dear Caroline," said Mrs. Brace;—and having returned her caresses with an affectionate warmth—or, at least, with a great display of tender feeling—the fashionable milliner gently disengaged herself from the arms of the poor girl who clung to her with the tenaciousness of a distracted grief.

At length Mrs. Brace, having succeeded in getting away from her, hurriedly took her departure: and Caroline Walters found herself alone in that gloomy apartment with the MIDWIFE!

CHAPTER XXII.

SCENES AT MRS. BRACE'S ESTABLISHMENT.

IT was about nine o'clock when Mrs. Brace reached her abode in Pall Mall; and repairing to her own private parlour—the one that we have described in a previous chapter—she threw off her cloak and bonnet, and summoned Harriet to her presence.

To her inquiries whether the letter had been duly sent to Mr. Meagles, and whether the cook had provided a succulent repast for Mr. Harley and Octavia, she received satisfactory replies; and having refreshed herself with a glass of the finest Madeira, after her journey to Mrs. Lindley's gloomy residence, she proceeded to the large room where the young ladies of her establishment were accustomed to take their meals.

This apartment was well furnished, and lighted by a chandelier suspended to the ceiling. A good fire blazed on the hearth;—the table was spread with a quantity of plate; and the eleven or twelve beautiful young women who were scattered about conversing in groups, enhanced the cheerful appearance of the scene.

We have before stated that these ravishing creatures formed a combination of charms and displayed a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. There, indeed, all admirers of whatsoever style of beauty might have found their tastes gratified. The tall and stately young woman, with dignified look and imposing demeanour,—the sylph-like figure and the volatile disposition,—the slender, pale, and interesting girl, with pensive countenance and bashful manners,—the stout, robust, and full-proportioned houri, with a voluptuous exuberance of charms,—the coal-black hair and the lustrous dark eyes,—the flaxen ringlets and the melting azure orbs,—the chesnut locks and the eyes of hazel,—the glowing auburn tresses and the eyes of dark blue,—the Roman countenance, denoting strong passions,—the Grecian profile, indicating a poetic sensuousness,—the lively French features, far more interesting than positively beautiful,—the pure English face, with its admirable blending of the healthy red and the delicate white,—the ravishing brunette, with eyes brimful of desire and lips that seem made only to be kissed;—these were the varied charms that made up the combination of so much female loveliness!

At about half-past nine o'clock, an excellent supper was served up. Poultry, game, French

dishes, sweets, preserved fruits, and wines, were spread with no niggard hand upon the board, at the head of which Mrs. Brace took her seat. And it was an enchanting spectacle to behold that really very handsome woman thus presiding at a table so well appointed in all its arrangements, and surrounded by a bevy of the most lovely girls that could possibly have been collected together.

In fact the milliner was accustomed to regale her young ladies with the most luxurious living. She likewise paid them good salaries, and spared no expense in ensuring their comfort beneath her roof. Had they been her own daughters, she could not have treated them better. But this was of course a matter of calculation on her part. They were useful to her: they constituted the main attraction of what may be termed the public department of her establishment; — for not only do fashionable ladies love to be attended upon by beautiful women,—but husbands, brothers, and even friends are sure to take wives, sisters, and female acquaintances to those shops where the most charming girls are to be seen. Then again, they ensured her a choice, select, and lucrative patronage in the *private* branch of her avocations. For every one was sold over and over again to the aristocratic debauchees and noble or wealthy voluptuaries for whose special behoof the house in St. James's Square was kept up; and as each of the houris in her establishment yielded Mrs. Brace hundreds of guineas per annum, she could well afford to regale them in excellent style, as it was also her interest to render them satisfied with their position and retain them in her employment.

But let us glance at their behaviour at the supper table. A stranger would have fancied that he was contemplating one of the most pleasing scenes which could possibly be presented to his gaze,—a kind-hearted, motherly, well-bred woman presiding at a table surrounded by young ladies of elegant manners, strict propriety of conduct, and of principles as excellent as their personal loveliness was ravishing. For although they were well aware that Mrs. Brace's establishment was nothing more nor less than a brothel of the first fashion,—and although Mrs. Brace herself knew that not an eye which met her own, reflected the thoughts of a chaste soul,—although, in a word, the charms which graced the banquetting-board were a marketable commodity, constantly obtaining a high price, nevertheless, not an improper word was uttered—not an impure idea nor even an indelicate allusion was ever syllabled by those mouths on which the hot lips of lust had been so often pressed.

After supper, Mrs. Brace and her attendant satellites proceeded into an adjoining apartment, which was denominated the *Ladies' Drawing-Room;* and there they diverted themselves in a variety of ways until eleven o'clock. Some read romances—others played at cards,—a few whiled away the time in embroidery for themselves,—one or two had recourse to music,—and the rest gathered round the cheerful fire to converse.

When the usual hour for retiring was proclaimed by a handsome time-piece upon the mantle, the young ladies all bade Mrs. Brace an affectionate "good night," and departed in an orderly manner —without noise, giggling, or confusion—to their respective chambers.

On the particular night of which we are speaking, and which was characterised by so many and such varied incidents, Mrs. Brace retired to her own bed-room immediately after the work-girls had quitted her; and in half-an-hour she sought her couch. Sleep soon visited her eyes; for, in spite of the equivocal nature of her avocation, she was not at any time much troubled with qualms of conscience.

But on the present occasion she was haunted by unpleasant dreams. The image of the unhappy Caroline Walters rose up before her mental view, — reproaching her for a base violation of solemn pledges made to the deceased parents of the girl, and for foul treachery practised towards the friendless orphan. At length—as it is often the case with dreams—the figure of the wronged and outraged Caroline changed suddenly into some ghastly shape, which seated itself upon the bosom of the sleeper;—and for a few minutes Mrs. Brace endured all the horrors of a night-mare.

She awoke in a cold tremor, and with a consternation in the brain. For a short time she could not persuade herself that she had been made the sport of a disordered imagination: but, as there was a light in the room, her eyes began to remark familiar objects; and she at length acquired the certainty that she was indeed safe in her own bed, and that nothing which her fevered fancy had conjured up was present to her view.

Referring to her watch, which lay on a night-table within reach, she found that it was only one o'clock in the morning, and that she had not slept more than an hour and a half. Settling herself, therefore, in the most comfortable position to woo the embraces of slumber, she closed her eyes, and was already beginning to feel a soft and dreamy repose stealing over her; when a strange sound caused her to wake suddenly up with a nervous start.

She listened with breathless attention—and all was still!

Was it, then, a false alarm?—perhaps the first phase in another hideous dream that was about to whirl her in imagination through the horrors of a second night-mare? Her mouth was parched—and she refreshed her palate with some sweet and delicious beverage that stood upon the night-table.

But as she put down the glass another strange sound fell upon her ears. Again she listened; the noise was continued—and, as she racked her imagination to conjecture what it could be, the thought flashed to her mind that it resembled the sawing of wood.

Mrs. Brace was a courageous woman naturally: she moreover knew that there were three persons of the male sex beneath the roof at that moment—namely, her two footmen and Mr. Harley. Succour might therefore be reckoned upon in case of danger;—and this reflection decided the milliner how to act.

Hastily thrusting her feet into slippers and enveloping herself in her cloak, she stole cautiously forth from her bed-chamber. Then she paused on the landing—and listened. The strange noise had ceased: but she fancied that she heard voices whispering somewhere below.

It often seems as if our organs had the faculty of rendering themselves more sensitive and keen on those occasions when their ordinary powers would scarcely answer the desired purpose or serve the sudden emergency:—and thus it was in the present

instance. For as Mrs. Brace held her breath to listen, her auricular sense acquired a remarkable vividness; and she distinctly heard the sounds of two rough voices whispering together in a very subdued tone. A few words that she caught—such as "saw," "crow-bar," and "skeleton-keys,"—convinced her beyond all possibility of doubt that thieves had obtained an entry into the house; and it was the dining-room door which they were thus deliberating how to force open, it being invariably locked every night by Mrs. Brace herself ere she retired to rest.

All her plate was kept in the side-board in that apartment: and she was suddenly seized with a mortal apprehension lest the robbers should possess themselves of so valuable a prize ere she could summon the necessary assistance. For, on second thoughts, she dared not call Mr. Harley to her aid: there were reasons why he must not stand the chance of being recognised in that house, even by thieves;—and she would have to descend the staircase and pass into the dwelling looking on St. James's Square in order to arouse her footmen.

What, then, was to be done? Moments—nay, minutes were flying;—and every one was precious!

Bending her head over the bannisters, she listened again. The men had succeeded in forcing open the door of the dining-room; and there was not an instant to lose.

It would be useless to awaken the young ladies and the female servants: such a proceeding might alarm the robbers, it was true—but would not perhaps prevent them from making off at once with the booty already in their reach. The only wise expedient was to summon the footmen;—and on this alternative she resolved, at any risk.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as possible in the dark, Mrs. Brace had gained the ground floor, and was on the point of entering the passage leading into the other house, when a light suddenly appeared upon the threshold of the dining-room—and as villanous a countenance as the imagination could ever associate with the name of "burglar" was simultaneously revealed to her eyes.

A scream rose to her lips: but it was stifled at the moment that it was bursting forth,—stifled, too, not by any abrupt violence on the part of the robber—but by a sudden consternation which seized upon the lady. A spell appeared to have been thrown around her all in an instant: a tremendous stupefaction—a mental paralysis, had struck her dumb—motionless—powerless.

At the same moment a faint exclamation of ineffable surprise escaped the lips of the burglar;—and he also appeared to be rivetted to the spot with a bewilderment that defies all attempt at description.

For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace and the burglar stand gazing fixedly upon each other,—he still holding a candle in his hand—she leaning against the wall to which she had staggered when the man's countenance first met her view,—he half doubting whether his eyes were not deceiving him—she every instant acquiring a deeper conviction that the features on which her looks were rivetted, were indeed familiar to her!

But the ejaculation which dropt from the tongue of the burglar, had caught the ear of his companion, who was inside the dining-room; and Mrs. Brace, therefore, speedily beheld another countenance appear in the door-way. This second face was red, bloated, and sinister—indeed, almost as vile and repulsive as the first: but it was totally unknown to the milliner.

The stupefaction which had seized upon her, now rapidly yielded to a sense of the very painful position in which she was placed. She no longer even thought of summoning assistance;—and, as to uttering a cry—her lips were sealed! Instead of hoping to have the burglars handed over to the grasp of justice, she felt that she herself was completely in the power of *one*—consequently of *both!*

Suddenly mustering up all her presence of mind and calling all her courage to her aid, Mrs. Brace advanced a few paces, motioning to the men to enter the room. Perceiving that she was about to follow them, they fell back; and then, the instant they had disappeared from the door-way, a pang shot through the brain of the milliner—and, pressing her hand to her brow, she felt for a moment as if her reason were deserting her. But this terrible sensation almost immediately passed away;—and, with a ghastly pallor of countenance, trembling limbs, and a heart palpitating violently, she crossed the threshold, closing the door behind her.

For nearly half-an-hour did Mrs. Brace remain in the company of the two burglars: but of the nature of their interview we can at present form no conjecture. That painful reminiscences had been revived and feelings of intense anguish excited on her part, we can however affirm: for when the door again opened and she came forth, it was with features even more ghastly and corpse-like than when she had entered that room.

Whether the robbers went away empty-handed, or not, we cannot state: but for one fact we can vouch—namely, that the plate remained untouched on the side-board, and that no valuables of any kind were plundered from the dining-room.

Mrs. Brace herself conducted them to the shop door, which they had forced open in the first instance by means of skeleton keys and a crow-bar; and when they had quitted the house, she sank down upon a chair—covered her face with her hands—and burst into a flood of convulsive weeping.

These tears relieved her;—and hurrying away from the shop, she stole cautiously back to her own bed-chamber, which she gained without disturbing a soul.

Sleep visited not her eyes for the remainder of that night. Painful thoughts racked her imagination and banished slumber: but as the hours passed slowly—slowly away, her excitement subsided, and she grew much calmer. It is often easy to conjure back hope where its presence is indispensable;—and thus was it that Mrs. Brace succeeded in persuading herself that she should not again be molested by the dreaded individual who had paid her dwelling so ominous a visit during the night.

She rose shortly after five o'clock, and entered her bath-room, where she plunged into the ice-cold water. Alike in winter and in summer, did Mrs. Brace bathe her entire person in this manner: hence the well-preserved condition of her charms and the plumpness of her form's voluptuous contours.

But never had the luxury of the cold bath appeared so truly refreshing as on this occasion. It cooled her heated brain—invigorated her entire frame, rendered languid by want of rest—and raised her depressed spirits almost to their usual tone. But if her cheeks still retained somewhat of the pallor that the

incident of the past night had left upon them, a cosmetic skilfully applied gave her the complexion of so soft a rose that it was impossible to recognise this triumph of art over nature.

It was shortly after six o'clock that Mrs. Brace descended to her own parlour, where the fire was already lighted. But scarcely had she entered that room, when the lady's-maid burst in with terror depicted upon her countenance, and exclaiming, "Oh! madam—a robbery has been committed during this night!"

Mrs. Brace affected to be sadly alarmed at this announcement; and, following the abigail, she hurried to the dining-room, the door of which had been opened by sawing partially round the lock and then breaking the wood away with a crow-bar—none of the burglars' skeleton-keys having previously succeeded in enabling them to effect an entrance. The side-board had likewise been forced, and all the plate taken out: but, on examining it, not a single article was missing. This circumstance naturally induced the lady's-maid to observe that the burglars were most probably interrupted by some false alarm in the middle of their work—a belief which the milliner took care to encourage, protesting however that it was very strange how so much violence could have been used without in reality disturbing a single soul.

From the dining-room Mrs. Brace and Harriet proceeded to the shop, where nothing had been meddled with. This was not, however, astonishing—as the robbers could not be supposed likely to trouble themselves with bonnets, dresses, and lace-caps. The front door had been forced in the manner already described: but as nothing appeared to have been stolen in the house, full confirmation was thus given to the abigail's opinion that the burglars were unexpectedly disturbed by some false alarm which however had the effect of inducing them to beat a precipitate retreat.

While Mrs. Brace and Harriet were conducting their investigations in the shop, the young ladies made their appearance in twos and threes at a time; and they were much alarmed at first on hearing that thieves had visited the house during the night:—but they were speedily tranquillised by the assurance that nothing had been stolen. Mrs. Brace intimated her desire that no unpleasant notice on the part of the public should be attracted towards the establishment by suffering the particulars of the attempted robbery to transpire; and thus the affair was effectually hushed up.

Scarcely had the milliner returned to her own parlour—it being now nearly seven o'clock in the morning—when Lord Florimel was announced by the footman whose duty it was to attend the door in St. James's Square, by which means of entrance, be it recollected, all persons of the male sex were introduced into the establishment.

The young nobleman had been home to his splendid mansion in Piccadilly, and had resumed his male attire: but it were really difficult to decide which became him most—and this, indeed, was the observation that Mrs. Brace made the moment the footman had retired.

"And now tell me of your success, my dear Florimel," she continued, with an arch smile which enabled her to display her very fine teeth: "your countenance is pale and pensively interesting——"

"Tell me, my dear friend," he abruptly exclaimed, "has Octavia taken her departure yet?"

"Oh! no," responded the milliner. "She can scarcely have slept off the effects of the wine in which the narcotic was mixed, and a glass of which her gallant administered to her. For Harriet was present at the time, and saw her take it."

"Then she is safe!" ejaculated Florimel, with strange emphasis.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Brace, gazing upon the nobleman in unfeigned surprise.

"My dear friend, do not seek explanations at present," he returned, in a tone slightly petulant: "you shall learn everything in the course of the day. I will come presently and have a long discourse with you. Nay—do not appear angry and pout," he added, patting her plump cheek with his delicate white hand, and resuming his wonted kindness of manner towards her.

"I cannot possibly be angry with you, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, instantly recovering a gay expression of countenance, while her eyes beamed with desire as he thus caressed her. "But has anything extraordinary occurred?"

"Nothing very particular—only that I have *not* succeeded with Pauline, and that I am far from sorry at the failure of my enterprise."

"You speak in enigmas," exclaimed the milliner.

"I will explain the whole by and bye, my dear friend. In the meantime I must fulfil a solemn promise which I have made to Pauline," continued the nobleman: "and this is to induce Octavia to return home without delay—for her father has come back!"

"Her father come back!" repeated Mrs. Brace, turning pale even through the artificial tint of her complexion. "Then all will be discovered——"

"Nothing will be discovered if you only consent to do as I require," interrupted Florimel.

At this moment Harriet entered the room, and whispered something in the ear of Mrs. Brace.

"You wish to see Octavia?" said the latter, turning towards Florimel, as soon as she had received the communication thus privately made to her by the abigail.

"Yes—without delay," answered the nobleman, emphatically.

Mrs. Brace made a sign to Harriet, who instantly quitted the room.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded Florimel, uneasily.

"Nothing of any consequence. Octavia's gallant has taken his departure—and the young lady herself, though comparatively pacified by all her lover has said to her this morning, nevertheless shrinks from the idea of returning home."

"I will undertake to tranquillise her completely," said Florimel. "Have the kindness to order a hackney-coach at once."

Mrs. Brace rang the bell, and gave the footman the requisite instructions. Immediately afterwards Octavia, dressed in her bonnet and shawl, was introduced by Harriet; but on perceiving that Mrs. Brace was not alone, she was about to retire, when the milliner hastily observed, "Fear nothing, Miss Clarendon—this nobleman is a *friend*. Indeed, you may place the utmost confidence in Lord Florimel," she added, by way of making her acquainted with his name and rank.

Octavia, who was very pale and had evidently been weeping, surveyed the young peer with a countenance expressive of mingled surprise and shame,—surprise at the emphatic way in which Mrs. Brace

had alluded to him as a *friend*—and shame at the idea that he was probably no stranger to her frailty.

But with that winning manner which seemed natural to him, and which on account of its feminine softness was so well calculated to inspire confidence, Lord Florimel approached her—took her hand—and said in a reassuring tone, "I am indeed a friend, Miss Clarendon; and in that light I wish you to consider me. But we have not a moment to delay in unnecessary discourse: you must return home immediately—your sister, who is an angel of goodness, will receive you with open arms—and you may likewise expect to embrace your father——"

"My father!" repeated Octavia, with a convulsive start, and with a wild expression suddenly springing up in her eyes.

"Fear nothing, I say—your father suspects not your absence, and need not know it," Florimel hastened to observe. "Pauline is the depositress of your secret—and she would sooner die than betray you."

"Pauline knows all!—my father is returned!" gasped the wretched girl, sinking upon a chair;—and then a flood of tears came to her relief.

"In the name of heaven, compose yourself, Miss Clarendon!" said Mrs. Brace, caressing her with a great show of affection. "Do you not comprehend what this kind nobleman has told you? Your sister has learnt your secret, and will do all she can to aid you——"

"It is this that cuts me to the soul," exclaimed Octavia, bitterly: "for how shall I be able to look my pure and virtuous sister in the face?"

"She loves you—loves you tenderly, Miss Clarendon," said Florime "But, for heaven's sake, come! It is now seven o'clock—and you must be home before eight!"

Octavia started up—dried her tears—and, the dread of her father's wrath arming her with sudden energy, declared her readiness to depart.

But as it would be dangerous to the reputation of Mrs. Brace's establishment for a lady and gentleman to be seen issuing forth together at that early hour in the morning, the milliner undertook to accompany Octavia in the hackney-coach as far as Piccadilly, where Florimel could join them and take her place.

This was accordingly done: the vehicle, with Mrs. Brace and the young lady inside, proceeded as far as the beginning of Bond Street, where it waited for Florimel, who passed out of the establishment by the house in St. James's Square. The milliner then alighted—the nobleman took his seat by Octavia's side—and the coach moved rapidly off towards the Edgeware Road.

Florimel now proceeded, in terms as delicate as possible, to give his fair companion certain necessary explanations. He told her how he had heard of her sister's charms and was resolved to win her heart—how he had called on the previous evening in female attire—how Pauline had discovered his treachery by some inadvertent expressions he had used—how he fell upon his knees before her and besought her forgiveness—and how a virtuous passion had superseded the base intentions that had originally animated him.

He then informed Octavia that while he and her sister were seated together in the back parlour, her father had unexpectedly arrived—that Pauline had succeeded in inducing him to believe that Octavia had already retired to rest—and that he (Florimel) had subsequently quieted Pauline's alarms by declaring the he knew where her sister was and would guarantee her safe return before eight in the morning. He added that being in Mrs. Brace's confidence, he was acquainted with Octavia's amour: but he assured her that he neither knew, nor sought to learn, who was the object of her affection.

Octavia scarcely comprehended all these details—for there was a confusion in her brain: she however understood enough to convince her that Pauline would save her from exposure in respect to her father—and that was all she cared for!

The explanations of Lord Florimel had scarcely reached their conclusion, when the coach came within sight of the villa; and the nobleman ordered it to stop. Octavia alighted—and, having murmured a few words of gratitude to her generous friend, she hurried away towards the house.

Florimel waited until he saw Pauline appear at the garden-gate to receive her sister; and the hasty signal which the younger Miss Clarendon made to him, as he kept his head out of the carriage-window, convinced him that Octavia was in time to escape detection on the part of her sire.

He then ordered the coachman to take him to his own residence in Piccadilly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. PAGE'S RESEARCHES.

Our readers will remember that we left Mr. Page in his bed at the George and Blue Boar, at the time when, awaking in the morning after his night's adventures in the eastern district of London, he found himself attacked by a violent fit of rheumatism. It will likewise be recollected that he sent for medical assistance; and the doctor immediately recommended him to take a warm bath. This the commercial traveller did; and, on returning to his bed, he fell into a sound sleep.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when he awoke; and he found himself so much better that he got up and sat by the fire. A basin of mock turtle soup, which he then discussed, appeared to improve him still more; and he was able to walk about his room with comparative ease—the rheumatism having subsided into a mere sensation of stiffness in the limbs.

On making inquiries of the waiter, he ascertained that his employer Mr. Hodson had called in the course of the day; but on being informed that Page was asleep, the merchant had taken his departure, as he was unwilling to disturb him.

Our readers have seen quite enough of the commercial traveller to be well aware that his disposition was of the most restless, bustling, and excitable nature; and they will not therefore be surprised when we inform them that he was most anxious to make certain researches suggested by one of the papers contained in the pocket-book.

This document was the scrap whereon the following lines were scrawled with a pencil, and in a tremulous hand:—

"Look under the stone in the farthest corner to the right, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia—and you will prosper: act rashly—and you will be ruined."

That this note was written by the old man who had died in his presence on the preceding night,

Page was tolerably well convinced: because that individual had spoken of Julia as his "ungrateful daughter"—and Julia's name was mentioned in the document. In fact, the intimation therein contained, was addressed to her: and to what could it allude, save a treasure?

Page had it all cut and dried in his imagination. The old man must have been a miser—and Julia would become an heiress! It was evident, by the existence of the note itself, that this Julia was unaware of the locality where her father kept his money—even if she knew that he had any money at all. Therefore, if Page could succeed in possessing himself of the treasure without her knowledge, so much the better: if not, then he could but propose to marry her—and he should become a rich man in either case.

Such was the castle-building in which the commercial traveller indulged, as he sate by the fire in his chamber; and to such a pitch of sanguine enthusiasm did his fertile and active imagination carry him, that he came to a conclusion of how silly it would be to permit the least unnecessary delay to occur ere he set about looking after the treasure.

Accordingly, he resolved to issue forth at once in search of that miserable court which had been the scene of the previous night's adventures. The rheumatism had pretty nearly left him—and, even if it had not, what cared he so long as he could drag one leg after another? But, then, was he not about to venture into the very jaws of danger? Might he not encounter the Magsman or some of that formidable fellow's adherents who knew him and who would thrust him back into the dungeon whence he had escaped with so much difficulty? All this was perfectly true: but were not the risks worth running? Page thought so: his avarice was excited—and his courage rose in proportion.

The clocks were striking six in the evening,—that same evening which Lord Florimel passed with Pauline, and on which Mrs. Brace took Caroline Walters to the midwife's house in Lambeth,—as Mr. Page, enveloped in his cloak, stepped into a hackney-coach in Holborn, and ordered himself to be driven to the East London Dock. At this point he alighted; and having dismissed the vehicle, began to take as well as he could possibly remember the same route which he had traversed in a contrary direction on the previous night.

Plunging into the maze of dark, dirty, and dangerous streets, he found that it was no easy task to trace a particular course in such a wilderness of brick and mortar, without the knowledge of even the names of the various thoroughfares. But Page was not readily baffled: he had a grand object in view—and never had he felt so bold and so enterprising. By dint of perseverance, he began to discover certain salient features which he remembered to have noticed on the former occasion: here, for instance, was a tavern with a flag-staff on the roof—there was the local round-house, or cage, with the watchman's box at the side,—here was a carrier's establishment, with two or three vans standing in the street—there was a blacksmith's forge where the heavy hammers rang and the glowing furnace blazed all night long,—here, again, was a public house with another remarkable sign that could not fail to be recognised even in the darkness—and there was a low boozing-ken, the door of which being always open, afforded the passers-by a view of the loathsome interior, the aspect of which would not be very readily forgotten.

Thus picking his way, and ever and anon recognising points or features which might be termed the land-marks of the district, Mr. Page at last succeeded in discovering the court whereof he was in search. For a moment his heart failed him as he plunged his looks up the low entrance-archway and thought of the noisome dungeon at the end: but when he beheld lights gleaming from many windows, his courage revived—for he thought within himself, "All the inhabitants of this court cannot be thieves or murderers; and as neither the Magsman nor his adherents should capture me without a desperate resistance on my part, assistance would surely arrive from some quarter or another in answer to my cries."

As this reflection passed through his mind, the commercial traveller mechanically placed his hands upon his coat-pockets to feel whether his pistols were safe; and at the same time he turned boldly into the court.

Not a soul was to be seen—all the doors were shut—but shouts of revelry and boisterous mirth came from some of the dwellings, while shrieks and oaths bore unmistakable testimony to the violent quarrels that were going on in others.

Page knocked at the house which was the object of his visit to this quarter of the metropolis: and he was just thinking what course he should adopt in case his summons remained unanswered, when the door was opened by a young female holding a light in her hand. She was poorly dressed,—but by no means bad-looking; for her features were regular, and her figure was good; but the dark circles round the eyes, the peculiar redness of the lips, and the extreme paleness of the cheeks gave her a dissipated air—while the boldness of her looks at once proclaimed the unblushing courtezan.

"Who are you?" she demanded abruptly—almost insolently, upon opening the door.

"If your name is Julia," said Page hastily,—for he did not admire the circumstance of being kept standing in the court,—"it is of the utmost importance that I should have a private conversation with you as soon as possible."

"But who are you, I again ask," cried the young woman, hesitating whether to admit the visitor, or not—indeed, uncertain whether to regard him as friend or foe.

"I was present at your father's death last night!" returned Page, in a solemn and impressive manner.

"Then walk in," said Julia, standing back to allow him room to enter the narrow passage: and when he had complied with her invitation, she closed and fastened the door. Leading the way into an empty room opening from the passage, she placed the candle on the mantel-piece, observing in a comparatively civil tone, "I am sorry, sir, that I cannot ask you up-stairs to the only chamber where there is any furniture,—but, as you may suppose, my father is laid out there—and I can't endure to look on a dead body."

"No apology is necessary," said Page. "An accident brought me into this house last night—and hearing moans up-stairs, I went to see if I could render any assistance——"

"And you found my father dying?" interrupted the girl, her voice indicating some degree of emotion. "I didn't know that he was so bad—or I wouldn't

have left him. In fact, when I went out in the evening, he was sitting up and able to walk—for he came down and bolted the front door after me, as was his wont——"

"Ah! I remember that the door *was* bolted inside, when I first entered the house," exclaimed Page. "But how did you obtain admittance——"

"Rather let me ask how *you* got into this place in the first instance?" cried the girl, now surveying the commercial traveller with looks indicative of mistrust.

"I will satisfy you on that head, Julia," was his immediate answer. "It was by the back way that I came hither——"

"Ah! then you are one of the gentlemen who escaped from the cellar in the next house?" exclaimed the young woman, her countenance clearing up. "Well—don't be afraid—I am not going to betray you. But you asked me how I got into the place, since there was no one—*living*," she added, with a cold shudder, "to open the door. Why—I did not come back until about eight o'clock this morning," she continued; "and then I was accosted in the court by Briggs——"

"Who's Briggs?" demanded the commercial traveller.

"The man that keeps the house next door," was the answer."

"Is he a great stout fellow, with an immense wen upon the crown of his bald head?" inquired Page.

"Just so," replied the girl; and the commercial traveller learnt accordingly that the individual alluded to was the same who had made him write the letter to Mr. Hodson, and who had given him the glass of gin. "Well," resumed Julia, "this man Briggs called me into his room next door—told me that a couple of gentlemen had escaped out of his cellar during the night—and begged me not to say a word about it in the neighbourhood. Of course it was no business of mine; and as I wanted to get into

my own house, Briggs let me pass through the opening which you had made in the wall. This was the way that I got in—and, on going up-stairs, I found my father a corpse in his bed. In the course of the day I noticed that the front door had been unbolted and unlocked—and I was surprised. But now you have explained the mystery."

"Was your father very rich, Julia?" asked Page, fixing upon her a searching look.

"Rich!" she ejaculated, with an ironical laugh.

"Ah! I see—my suspicions are confirmed—he was a miser!" exclaimed the commercial traveller. "But you don't know—you haven't any idea where he was accustomed to conceal his wealth?"—and again he bent his eyes significantly on the young woman.

"Not I, indeed!" she observed, in a strange tone. "Nevertheless," she added, almost immediately, "there must have been a large quantity——"

"Of gold somewhere—eh?" cried Page, chuckling. "Yes—yes—you are right there, my dear. And now, what will you do for me if I help you to—to—this treasure?" he demanded, hesitating whether he should impart his secret to her, or devise some scheme to become the sole possessor of the wealth to which he supposed the scrap of paper to allude.

"What will I do for you?" she exclaimed: "anything you like."

"It would be a pity to divide it," remarked Page, again eyeing her significantly. "A sum of money that is a *fortune* in itself, only makes two poor *competencies* when split into equal shares."

"Pray explain yourself," observed the young woman, impatiently.

"I suppose—that is, I hope—I believe—I presume you are a single woman, Julia?" said the commercial traveller, endeavouring to ogle her tenderly.

"Oh! that I am," she exclaimed, flippantly. "What next?"

"Nothing particular *now*—at least on that point," returned Page. "But we must at once pass on to another important feature in the business which we have in hand together. Is this your father's writing?" he demanded, with a cunning look, as he produced the scrap of paper.

Julia took the documentary fragment in her hand—glanced rapidly over it—and, with a sudden animation of countenance, exclaimed, "Yes—this is the old man's writing: and now we may be rich for the remainder of our days!"

"I thought so!" ejaculated Page, delighted at finding his fondest hopes thus completely fulfilled. "Come—let us visit the cellar without delay, and inspect the treasure. I will then tell you why I asked whether you were married or not."

The girl smiled significantly, as if she read her companion's meaning and required no farther explanation: and Page was pleased to observe that she possessed a very good set of teeth.

They now descended the stairs to the kitchen, where Julia lighted a lantern, observing that the draught would blow out the candle; and thence they proceeded to the cellar.

The first object which met the eyes of the commercial traveller was the pile of masonry which had been detached from the aperture that had enabled himself and Sir Richard Stamford to escape from the adjoining cellar on the preceding night;—and a chill passed over him as he thought of the possibility of his revisit to that neighbourhood being discovered by the ruffian Briggs or any of his vile confederates—the consequence of which detection would inevitably be a re-consignment to his old quarters, with unconquerable precautions against another escape.

He therefore hesitated for a few moments on the upper step leading into the cellar, and was almost inclined to beat a precipitate retreat: but Julia, who had preceded him, held the lantern high up so as to fling the light upon the spot which she indicated, as she observed, "There's the stone which the paper alludes to."

The idea of being within reach, as it were, of a treasure which his imagination represented to be of no insignificant amount, restored Page to that desperate courage wherewith he had armed himself for the present enterprise; and boldly descending the steps, he proceeded to inspect the stone beneath which the miser's hoardings lay.

"It will require some strong instrument to raise it," he observed, at the expiration of a few moments.

"There is a pick-axe in the kitchen," said Julia; "and I have often wondered what it could be for. Now I understand why my father sometimes required such a thing."

Thus speaking, she tripped lightly away to fetch the implement—while Page retraced his steps to the threshold of the cellar, so as to guard against any treacherous intention which might possibly exist on the girl's part to close the door upon him.

On her return in about a minute, with the pick-axe in her hand, she immediately conjectured what was passing in the mind of the commercial traveller: for, gazing intently upon his countenance, the young woman said, "You are perhaps right as a prudent man to mistrust me: but if you knew how much I hate the people next door—I mean Briggs and all his friends—you would not be alarmed. Besides, have you not come on a business which may prove beneficial to me?—and why, therefore, should I seek to do you an injury?"

"I am glad you have spoken to me in this manner," said Page, perceiving that Julia was rapidly losing her sullenness of temper and acquiring confidence in him: "because it makes me feel all the more pleasure in co-operating with you. You are a nice girl, Julia," he added, patting her face and again ogling her tenderly—which little indications of the matrimonial views which she suspected him to entertain were far from disagreeable to the girl.

"Now, then—get to work," she exclaimed, smiling, and fixing her bold eyes wantonly on the commercial traveller.

He returned the leer, and took the pick-axe from her hand: then, throwing back his cloak, he commenced operations. The mortar which surrounded the flag-stone was not particularly hard; and the task of raising it was speedily accomplished. When it was removed, half-a-dozen canvass bags of tolerable size appeared in a small hollow beneath.

"Six thousand guineas, at the lowest computation!" ejaculated Mr. Page, his heart leaping with delight; and, taking up one of the bags, he weighed it in his hand. "Yes—this contains a thousand, I am sure!" he added, in a tone of exultation.

"How shall we remove them?" asked Julia, also in a joyous manner: "and where shall we take them to?"

"First into the kitchen—or up-stairs, in the room to which you showed me just now," responded the commercial traveller.

This latter suggestion was immediately adopted; and when the bags had been conveyed to the empty chamber on the ground-floor and ranged upon the mantel-piece in such a fashion that Mr. Page could embrace the entire array with one gloating glance, he said, "Now, my pretty Julia, we must decide upon our future proceedings. In me you behold a commercial traveller of high respectability and old standing—capable of giving the most satisfactory references. I am unmarried—and have long wanted a wife. What do you say? Can you be happy as Mrs. Page? If so—the bargain is soon struck and the fortune need not be divided."

"Well—if you're willing to take me as I am," responded the young woman unhesitatingly, "I'm sure I cannot object to take you as you are. But we must leave this place together—I mean that we must not separate till the—the——"

"Till the knot is tied—eh, Julia?" added Mr. Page, throwing his arm around her waist and imprinting a kiss upon her lips—which latter process made him aware of the fact that she had recently partaken of a liquor smelling marvellously like gin: but he was not disposed to be over nice under the circumstances.

"Yes—that is what I meant," she observed. "If you are going to make a lady of me, the sooner the better. But my father was a gentleman once, by all accounts," added Julia, with some degree of mournfulness in her tone, as her thoughts were thus suddenly brought back to the memory of her deceased parent.

"By the bye, what is your surname, my dear?" inquired Page.

"Lightfoot," was the answer.

"I thought so!" ejaculated the commercial traveller.

"What do you mean?" demanded the young woman. "Do you know anything about us?"

"Yes—something—but no matter now," replied Page. "We will talk of all that by and bye. For the present we have other business to think of. Stay here we cannot—those villains next door would find me out: and yet how to leave the house until your father is buried——"

"I have already given directions relative to the funeral, which will take place as privately as possible three days hence," interrupted Julia. "In the meantime we can remain together: for even if you had not come here to-night and I had never known you, I should not have stayed any longer in the house with the corpse."

"Come, then," said Page: "we will depart at once. If you have a good strong piece of cord, I will fasten four of these bags round my waist, and my mantle will cover them. The other two you can carry under your shawl or cloak, whichever you possess."

"Stay one moment," exclaimed Julia; and, quitting the room, she hastened up-stairs.

In about a minute she returned, wearing her bonnet and cloak, and carrying a small bundle in her hand. She likewise brought a piece of rope, wherewith the commercial traveller slung four of the bags round his body. The young woman took charge of the remainder of the treasure; and when she had ascertained, by peeping forth from the front door, that the coast was clear, she and her companion quitted the house together.

On emerging from the court, Page directed Julia to guide him by the nearest route towards Tower Hill, where they entered a hackney-coach, which drove them, according to the instructions given, to a tavern in Farringdon Street. There they took up their quarters for the night; inasmuch as the commercial traveller knew very well that he would not be allowed to introduce his female friend to the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

On the ensuing morning, shortly after nine o'clock, Mr. Page and Julia Lightfoot crossed over the way to the Fleet Prison; and in that establishment they speedily found a parson, who, for the handsome recompense of half-a-crown and a gallon of ale, tied the matrimonial knot and pronounced the nuptial benediction. For at that period Fleet marriages were lawful; and thus the couple who had only known each other a few hours, were made indissolubly *one*.

The reader may perhaps be startled at the circumstance of this ceremony taking place while the corpse of Julia's father was yet above the grounds: but she was anxious on her part to nail a husband while he was in the humour to take her and who, as she termed it, could "make a lady of her;" while he, on the other hand, was equally solicitous to establish a right to that treasure which, until the nuptials were celebrated, belonged wholely and solely to the young woman. Thus all feeling of delicacy was superseded by selfish interest on either side.

As soon as the marriage-rites were thus performed by a drunken parson, assisted by an insolvent prize-fighter who fulfilled the duties of clerk, and in the presence of three or four male and female prisoners who attended as witnesses, Mr. and Mrs. Page drove into Southwark, where they took a genteel lodging, at which we must leave them for the present.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FATHER AND DAUGHTERS.

It is now necessary that we should return to Octavia Clarendon, at the moment when, having taken leave of Lord Florimel who had escorted her home in the manner already described, she encountered Pauline at the garden gate.

But the instant that she met her sister's gaze, the blood gushed in a full tide to her countenance, before so pale; and the words that she would have uttered seemed to rise like a torrent of lava to her throat—remaining there with suffocating effect, and unable to obtain utterance.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia, restrain your feelings," said Pauline, speaking in low hurried tones, as she waved her handkerchief as a signal to Lord Florimel whom she beheld looking forth from the window of the hackney-coach at a little distance. "All is well—our father suspects not your absence," she added with equal haste.

"O Pauline! do you not despise your sister?" murmured Octavia, now recovering the powers of her voice.

"For God's sake, talk not thus!" was the young maiden's rapid adjuration, as she led the way into the house, followed by her sister.

They ascended to their bed-chamber, where Octavia threw aside her bonnet and shawl: then, flinging herself into Pauline's arms, she burst into tears.

"Not a word relative to anything that has oc-

curred!" whispered the younger sister, affectionately pressing the other to her bosom.

"But what can you think of me, Pauline?—what opinion can you entertain of one who——My God!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself: "wherefore is it that the rose-entwined path of love should be interspersed with thorns?"

"I conjure you not to give way to these emotions, sister—dearest sister!" murmured Pauline, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Do you not know that I love you? If you are unhappy, is it I who will augment the anguish you already experience? Oh! heavens—no! I have done all I could to screen you—I will do all I can to comfort and console you!"

"Beloved Pauline!" exclaimed Octavia, again and again embracing her kind-hearted sister: then, growing more composed, she said, "It is a terrible necessity which now compels me to prepare to meet my father and subdue the blushes that shame would bring to my cheeks."

"Every word you utter, Octavia, appears to express a regret for what is past," returned Pauline, now surveying her sister with the tenderest solicitude. "Is it possible you can have learnt to love one who is unworthy of you, and whose name you would blush to mention?"

"No—no," answered Octavia, in an impassioned tone: "he whom I love is the noblest—the kindest—and the best of men; and in a few days he will seek an introduction to my father—he will then become a constant visitor to the house—and, after the lapse of a proper interval, he will demand my hand in marriage."

"Then what have you to deplore so deeply?" asked Pauline, delighted with this assurance, and seeking, in the generosity of her soul, to make it even the means of glossing over her sister's fault.

"I do not deplore having given my love to Mr. Harley," responded Octavia, now speaking with the pride of a woman the immensity of whose love is her boast, because she believes herself to be as fondly loved in return.

"Mr. Harley!" ejaculated Pauline, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes—it is he who is to become my husband," replied Octavia.

"This revelation to me is another source of joy," observed the younger sister, her countenance becoming still more radiant: "because I am certain that he is an honourable man. His bearing—his conversation—his delicate attentions—his frank and ingenuous manners—his looks,—all, all bespeak him to be of nature's nobility!" cried the enthusiastic girl, proclaiming the honest convictions of her candid and unsuspecting soul.

"And therefore, dear Pauline," said Octavia, into whose bosom the full tide of confidence, truthfulness, and joy was rapidly transfusing from that of her sister,—"and therefore do I not regret having given my love to him. But I was unhappy—my heart was weighed down—my spirits were depressed, because I feared lest I should become an object of scorn and shame in the eyes of her whom I love and who is so generous and so kind towards me."

"No—never, never!" exclaimed Pauline: and again the sisters embraced fondly. "Is not this singular," said the younger maiden, after a short pause, "that we should both experience love's passion almost at the same time? For I also love, Octavia," she added, looking down and with blushes suffusing her cheeks: "yes—I have suddenly learnt to love that handsome young nobleman who brought you home."

"He told me somewhat of your singular interview—but I was too bewildered to comprehend his words in their full sense," observed Octavia. "I however understood enough to know that he sought you in the first instance with an evil intent, and that your virtue subdued him and excited an honourable passion in his soul."

"Such was the case," answered Pauline. "I will make you acquainted with all the details when we have more leisure to converse together," she added, secretly pleased to evade the subject: for the reminiscences of the past night brought the burning blushes to her cheeks, innocent in her virgin purity as she still was. "We must now descend to the breakfast-table: our father will doubtless soon leave his room. And remember, Octavia, should he remark upon his late arrival—remember, I say, that he believed us to have retired to rest hours before: for when he knocked at the door, I hurried up-stairs from the back parlour where I was seated with Lord Florimel—so that I might show a light in the bed-room ere I descended to open the door. I likewise put on my cloak, that he might believe I had hastily risen and had thrown on a few clothes for that purpose."

It was strongly repulsive to Pauline's feelings to utter these little falsehoods in order to impart such a colouring to the incidents that her sister might not suspect Lord Florimel to have actually been in the bed-chamber with her, instead of in the back parlour as she stated: but she would rather even thus condescend to misrepresentation than have her virtue suspected even for an instant by confessing that her prolonged interview with the nobleman had positively occurred in the sleeping-apartment.

Octavia, being now composed and having recovered her presence of mind, descended to the breakfast-table with her sister. There they were speedily joined by Mr. Clarendon, who embraced both his daughters not only with the affectionate satisfaction attendant upon his return home, but likewise with the joy of a parent who has good tidings to impart to his children. Octavia's heart fluttered, and she felt herself blushing and then turning pale a dozen times in a minute, as she received her father's caresses: for she could not resist the reflection that she was pure and chaste when he bade her adieu ere he set out upon his journey, and that it was not with the guilelessness of an innocent heart that she could greet his return.

But Mr. Clarendon did not observe his elder daughter's emotions; and as he made no remark respecting any circumstance attending his late arrival, but began almost immediately to give an account of his journey, her trepidation was speedily soothed and her confidence restored.

It appeared that Mr. Clarendon, on presenting himself at Marchmont Castle in Derbyshire, was received by his noble cousin with a readiness and a cordiality which both amazed and delighted him. The reason of this remarkable and most unexpected condescension on the part of Lord Marchmont was however soon explained. This haughty peer was a

widower and had but one son, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who was about three-and-twenty years of age. Until within a few months of the period of which we are writing, this youthful scion of a noble house had enjoyed such excellent health that he had never known a day's illness: but all of a sudden his constitution appeared to give way,—not with a gradual approach of premature decay—but with an abruptness as if some vital chords in the heart had broken and existence was only held by the few feeble ligaments which remained. The colour forsook his cheeks—his frame, hitherto vigorous though never robust, grew debilitated—his appetite failed him—and he could not induce himself to take enough nourishment to repair the waste of his body: The most eminent physicians were consulted; and they pronounced the affliction to be an unusually inveterate state of atrophy which had thus seized upon this young man, till then so promising. His condition was kept secret from the friends and acquaintances of the family for some months, in the hope that a restoration to health would be accomplished and thus render it unnecessary to excite alarm: but the disease made such rapid progress, that Lord Marchmont lost all hope—for death appeared to be approaching with giant strides that might be *seen !*

The nobleman was thus doomed—in his old age, for he had married very late in life—to behold his son perishing before his eyes; and he now began to reflect that when the fatal moment should arrive and Arthur Eaton should be snatched away by the merciless grasp of the Destroying Angel, the long-neglected —long-discarded — almost forgotten Mr. Clarendon would become heir presumptive to the proud title and vast estates of Marchmont! Therefore, when this gentleman suddenly made his appearance at the Castle, the old nobleman gave him the cordial though mournful welcome due to one who was in all probability destined to be his successor; and Mr. Clarendon then for the first time heard of the distressing state of his younger relative's health. Lord Marchmont spoke not of the past as it regarded his treatment of Mr. Clarendon: but he was liberal in his offers and proposals for the future. The result was that the father of Octavia and Pauline returned home with the certainty of an income of a thousand a-year for the future, and with every prospect of full soon becoming the heir to a noble title and an immense fortuue.

Such was the intelligence which Mr. Clarendon now communicated to his daughters, and which they heard with mingled joy and sorrow: for if on the one hand they were delighted at the altered prospects of their well-beloved father, they could not help experiencing a profound sympathy on behalf of their youthful cousin who was so sorely and painfully afflicted. And this feeling was the more admirable on their part, inasmuch as they had not only never seen either Lord Marchmont or the Honourable Arthur Eaton—but they had no very excellent reasons for being interested in a haughty family at whose hands their sire had suffered so much chilling neglect.

Mr. Clarendon now began to unfold to them the views which he had conceived relative to their future mode of life. He proposed forthwith to take a house in a fashionable neighbourhood, and court that society in which the improved state of his circumstances would henceforth enable himself and his daughters to move. Octavia and Pauline were both delighted at the prospects thus developed to their contemplation: for the same thought instantly struck them both—namely, that their sudden elevation in the social sphere would render them more worthy of the suitors who had already appeared for their hands.

A considerable portion of the morning was taken up in these explanations and discussions; and when there was at last a pause in the conversation, Octavia and Pauline began to inform their father of the adventure which had occurred in respect to Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt. They told him how the carriage had broken down in the road,—how they offered the hospitality of the villa to the two ladies travelling in the vehicle,—how Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother during the night,—how the infant boy was entrusted in a mysterious manner to Mr. Thurston, the surgeon,—and how Mrs. Smith had insisted upon presenting them (Octavia and Pauline) with valuable presents in return for their kindness.

Mr. Clarendon listened with profound attention to the extraordinary narrative; and when it was concluded, he praised his daughters for having so promptly offered the ladies an asylum, but regretted that they should have accepted the jewellery. On this point he however touched lightly enough: for his own altered circumstances had put him into too good a humour and had elevated his spirits too highly to allow him to be very serious in his remonstrances. In respect to the adventure itself, he coincided with the opinion which Octavia and Pauline had already formed, to the effect that the ladies were most probably of rank and that the names of *Smith* and *Mordaunt* were assumed. But with regard to the terms on which Mr. Thurston had consented to take charge of the child, and the payment of the large sum of ten thousand pounds, Mr. Clarendon still remained ignorant — inasmuch as his daughters themselves were unacquainted with these arrangements.

Relative to Mr. Harley not a word was said; and we need scarcely observe that an equal silence was observed in reference to the visit of Lord Florimel. For these were secrets which the young ladies had obvious reasons for cherishing.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NIGHT OF TERRORS.

It was evening—half-past nine on the second evening of Caroline Walters' residence in the house of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife.

The young girl was seated alone in her chamber, listening to the hurricane that raged without: for the gale blew in terrific blasts—now rushing over the turbid Thames as if with a violence and a power sufficient to hurl down the very bridges themselves, —then sweeping along the narrow street, and apparently enveloping that particular house with all its whirlwind might,—now lulling for a short interval into a dreary succession of moaning sounds,—and then again collecting its appalling energies for a renewal of its tempestuous fury.

The chamber allotted to the young girl was on the second floor, and at the back of the house. Its windows therefore looked upon the Thames: but as the river, even at full tide, was much lower than the street, that casement was a considerable height above the water.

And it was full tide now—and, as she sate in her room, Caroline could hear, during each occasional

full of the wind-storm, the plash of the rapid current against the piles which served as buttresses to the foundations of the dwelling. Those sounds, so ominous and drear, struck terror to her heart: for they seemed mingled with the moans of drowning men—and the thought that a watery grave lay ready there, beneath the very window, was suggestive of horrible ideas of suicide as a relief to this world's care and suffering! Yes: it was but a step—a single step that lay between the unhappy girl and the waters of oblivion;—and yet she dared not take it—Oh! no—no!

Nevertheless, who at that moment was so wretched as Caroline? All the circumstances of her past life and her present position were present to her memory with the vividness of stationary lightning—if such a phenomenon could possibly have existence. She was an orphan—and she retained the fondest recollections of dear and loving parents, now no more: she had been left to the care of Mrs. Brace, whom she had looked upon as her only friend, and who, while affecting to perform a mother's part, had thrown the unprotected girl in the way of the systematic seducer! *Him* she had loved—madly, fervently loved; and in *his* presence her looks had beamed with a radiance more divine and a brilliance more warm than the scorching rays of that land to which her mother had belonged and where she herself first saw the light. For Spanish blood flowed in her veins, and imparted a higher glow to her transparent brunette complexion than characterises English beauty! But when she had surrendered the only earthly treasure which she possessed—her virtue—to him who had won her young heart's best and purest affections, she soon—Oh! too soon—perceived that it was not love which she had read in his impassioned looks, but a gross sensuality that when appeased left him comparatively cold and distant. For some time did she close her eyes as well as she was able to this sickening—desolating truth; and when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she was fond, and confiding, and sanguine enough to hope that he would fulfil all his promises—accomplish all his vows—and give a father's honourable name to the child that was in due time to be ushered into the world. He did not spurn her—he did not even disdain her prayer, it is true: but he replied in a manner that left her only to persist in hoping on even against the destruction of hope itself. Then came the necessity of her retirement to the midwife's abode: and here we now find her,—alone in her chamber—in a solitude made more terrible by her own distracting thoughts.

O God! how often is it that woman is destined to pour out the divinest flood of her bosom's affections and her soul's sympathies into a heart which is hollow, vacant, and unfilled to the last!—how often does woman—beautiful, adorable woman—perish miserably through the vileness of that man's heart which is thus unworthy to receive that torrent of holiest devotion—that full tide of purest love! And how often it is, great heaven! that not only does one woman pine and die for such a heart,—but that a hundred living, bursting female hearts are doomed to perish wretchedly, wretchedly for the infamy of one man!

But if Caroline Walters could no longer live for love—yet she might still live on for vengeance! A great change had come over the young girl during the twenty-four hours which she had now passed beneath the midwife's roof. She no longer attempted to veil from her sight the misery of her position. Lost—betrayed—abandoned by him whom she had adored, the full measure of his deceit and treachery developed itself, in all its black details, to her appalled understanding. Then came jealousy, too,—running like the bursting of a pent-up torrent through every avenue of her soul;—and she felt assured that she had been deserted for some other fair one! Her Spanish blood boiled like a lava-stream in her veins;—and a thirst for vengeance, acquiring all the intensity of a ferocious passion, penetrated like a consuming flame into the very depths of the young girl's being!

The dark nature of her thoughts scared her, as she thus sate ruminating in her lonely chamber. The ideas upon which her bewildered mind settled itself—ideas urging her Spanish nature to revenge—appeared to be a crime. But the longer she studied them—the more she dwelt upon them, the less startling did they become. And then arose new sources of terror in the influence which the raging wind-storm without and the plashing of the turbid waters below exercised upon her soul;—and lastly came those thoughts of suicide, which convulsed her entire frame with ineffable horror.

But, no—no: she must live for vengeance!

Rising from her seat, and casting a hurried glance around the chamber,—which was small, but neatly furnished, though gloomy in its aspect,—she felt that she must do something to occupy her mind. She knew that she could not sleep even if she retired to her couch;—and her utter loneliness alike of position and of mind, began to have an influence over her which was intolerable.

What if she were to seek an hour's companionship with one of the four young females to whom she had been introduced, and with whom she had passed the greater portion of the day? They were kind and compassionate towards her: for they were in a condition even to afford consolation, inasmuch as they did not feel their own degraded state as deeply and as severely as Caroline felt her's.

Yes: she would stealthily seek the chamber of some one of those young women; for every instant was the awful sense of solitude becoming more difficult to endure.

Taking the candle in her hand, she stole noiselessly forth from her room: but when she found herself in the large landing outside, and beheld three or four doors besides her own opening thence, she knew not at which to knock.

After hesitating for a few moments, she blamed herself for her irresolution; and, tapping gently at the door of the chamber precisely opposite, waited for the answer. None reached her ear: and, growing positively terrified by the deep silence which reigned throughout the house and which had in it something mysteriously awful at the time when the wind was roaring in such terrific gusts without, she opened the door. A glance into the room convinced her that it was not a sleeping-chamber: nevertheless, an unaccountable feeling of curiosity prompted her to enter. She crossed the threshold and advanced, holding the candle high up so as to obtain a complete view of the place.

It was a lumber-room, where broken furniture and articles not in use were stowed away; and it had that peculiar disagreeable, earthly smell which invariably prevails in apartments constantly shut

up, and where old wooden things are mouldering with the process of decay. To the walls were suspended bunches of herbs of various kinds, hung there to dry; and amongst them was a considerable quantity of savin, the detestable use of which in such hands as those of Mrs. Lindley, was to produce abortion. But of this fact Caroline Walters was happily ignorant: otherwise, it would only have increased the sentiment of aversion which she already experienced with regard to the midwife.

Nevertheless, if the sight of those herbs produced no unpleasant effect upon the young girl, she was speedily horrified and startled by other spectacles which this room presented. For, ranged upon a shelf stood several glass jars, each containing the diminutive corpse of an infant preserved in spirits of wine. Yielding to an invincible impulse of curiosity, but with a cold tremor of the frame, Caroline advanced to scan these objects nearer; and as she gazed with mingled loathing and fearful interest, she discovered something connected with each tiny body that enhanced the poignancy of those feelings. For they were monsters—human monsters—which were preserved in those bottles, and on which the eyes of the young girl were thus fixed!

That those infants had died at their birth, was probable: that some, if not all, had been murdered, either by stifling or poison, was not very unlikely; —but this latter idea did not for a moment strike Caroline Walters. All her thoughts were absorbed in the loathsome monstrosities which she was contemplating. For in one jar was an infant with an enormous protuberance, having the appearance of an immense wen, upon one side of its little head: another contained a child of hideous features and without any arms;—a third displayed the horrid spectacle of twin bodies with one head—the revolting production of nature thus having four arms and four legs;—and a fourth vase contained an infant corpse that had neither arms nor legs at all. In fine, these specimens of the terrible eccentricities which occasionally come within the cognizance of those who practise midwifery, were amongst the most revolting which the annals of the art have ever recorded.

Turning away at length from the disgusting exhibition, and with such a sickening sensation at the heart that she was forced to place the candle-stick upon a table for fear she should drop it and be left in the dark amidst those horrors, Caroline leant against the wall for support. While thus sustaining herself, and wondering what sentiment of curiosity could have originally prompted her to enter the room at all, she cast her eyes around as if fearful lest some terrific spectre should suddenly rise from amidst the pile of lumber or appear upon the threshold of the door,—when her looks settled upon a tall black wooden case, standing upright against the wall.

Again she shuddered with a cold trembling from head to foot: for this box at first struck her as being a coffin that was planted there! But a second and more searching glance showed her that it had not that angular projection of the sides which marks the sinister shape of the receptacle for the dead.

And now that same mysterious and invincible curiosity which had already influenced her on this eventful evening, once more impelled her to approach the object of her attention: and observing that the case had a door hung on hinges and fastened by means of a small latch, she was prompted to open it.

The door swung back: but no pen can describe the terror which seized upon the young woman when the bleached bones of a skeleton were suddenly revealed to her view.

The consternation which fell upon her, stifled the cry that rose to her lips: and for nearly a minute she was held as it were motionless—petrified—statue-like,—and yet with her very flesh creeping. Horror seized upon her brain: the effect was as if the Medusa's head had thus abruptly met her eyes—turning her to stone. While this appalling influence lasted, by no human effort could she have averted her gaze from the anatomy: a supernal power appeared to rivet her looks on the whitened skeleton!

And that skeleton!—it appeared to be standing upright in its case—for it was fastened by the head to the top thereof: its long fingers were slightly bent—its toes pointed downward;—it seemed to grin horribly with its two rows of white and perfect teeth,—and Caroline thought that with its eyeless sockets it looked with a stony and death-like gaze upon her.

At the same moment that this appalling spectacle was displayed to her view,—appalling we say, considering her state of mind,—the wind came roaring, rushing, and bellowing down upon the house with such fury that it shook to its very foundation;—and for an instant the thought flashed to the girl's imagination that the day of judgment was at hand.

A draught swept through the chamber in spite of the well-closed windows with their shutters inside and their large wooden shades without,—for this room looked into the street,—and, agitated by that piercing, penetrating gust, the herbs rustled against the wall like the garments of some being approaching the young woman from behind—and the bones rattled slightly in the upright box.

A vertigo seized upon the unfortunate Caroline; and, staggering back—but uttering no cry, for her lips were sealed by the feeling that was now passing over her—she sank on a chair that happened to stand near. Wildly she cast her eyes around: objects of terror, conjured up by her excited imagination, met them on every side;—and, she felt as if she were about to go raving mad, when a bell was suddenly rung with violence in the house.

Caroline started from her seat; and all the apparitions which her fancy had depicted, vanished in an instant. The thought flashed to her that some one was up and stirring in the dwelling; and the sensation of utter loneliness abandoned her. It seemed as if something like life and animation had awakened beneath that roof: the certainty sprang up in her mind that should she call out for assistance, succour would come;—and it was even with a courageous feeling that she closed the door of the skeleton's case.

Scarcely had she done this, when the bell was rung furiously a second time;—and Miss Walters hurried back to her own chamber.

Shutting the door as noiselessly as possible, she placed the candle upon the mantel-piece, and seated herself to listen: for she knew that the summons came from one of the chambers tenanted by the midwife's lodgers. Then the thought struck her that Mrs. Lindley, who slept in a room below, would be hurrying up-stairs to answer that bell: and it was probable that she would see the light in Caroline's

chamber gleaming through the key-hole The young girl, now no longer afraid, thereupon extinguished the candle; and, approaching the door, she held her breath to listen.

Almost immediately afterwards, some one came hurrying up the staircase; and Caroline knew by her step, hasty though it were, that it was Mrs. Lindley. The midwife passed by the young woman's door, but stopped short at the next on the right hand; and Caroline heard her enter the adjoining apartment.

That was the chamber occupied by the lady concerning whom *the utmost precaution and secrecy were requisite,—the young lady of high birth, who never quitted her room!*

The wind had experienced some degree of abatement in its violence—and its gusts were less frequent than during the earlier part of the evening. But still it gushed along the bosom of the Thames and swept at intervals over the house: and soon those sounds without were mingled with moans of female anguish within. Trembling from head to foot with new and undefined alarms, and experiencing a boundless sympathy for the young lady whom she supposed to be in the agonies of maternity, but whom to her knowledge she had never seen,—Caroline Walters began to feel her Spanish blood boiling with the excitement of an intense loathing in regard to that house of terrible mystery whither shame repaired to hide its head—where children were born heaven only knew now to be disposed of—and where a vile woman throve upon the dark and sinister practice which, as she herself had boasted to Mrs. Brace, never left her chambers untenanted!

For nearly half-an-hour did the moans, varied by occasional subdued screams, continue in the next room;—and all that time Miss Walters remained still and motionless in her own chamber,—but with a fearful excitement rapidly increasing upon her. At length, so heated grew her brain, that she felt she must either have fresh air or be suffocated. The room seemed to have become a coffin: the atmosphere was to her senses as sultry as the torrid glow of the tropics. Nevertheless, it was—as the reader remembers—in the depth of winter; and the blast was blowing without as if it had come laden with the ice-chill of far-off Labrador

Approaching the window, Caroline opened it as noiselessly as she could; and the cutting wind's intensity of cold was lost upon her. It seemed but a gentle breeze that fanned her feverish cheeks and blew back the hair from her countenance.

Dark as pitch was the night without: black as a funereal pall did that darkness seem to hang upon the river and against the house. Not a star peeped forth from above: not even an outline of the tempestuous clouds that were piled one upon another, could be seen;—for it was the very air itself that seemed to be a flood of jet but impalpable ink. The young girl could hear the rush of the river and its constant plashings against the piles below: but there was not a gleam upon its surface—not a mitigated shade to show that it was water running there. All was black—densely, profoundly black, like the interior of a vast cavern whither the light of day penetrated not, and where no lamp illumed the scene.

Yes: it was a night which crime would revel in for its own vile purposes,—a night from which conscience would shrink appalled, when remorse was present,—a night that would make the rich rejoice in the possession of their warm rooms and their downy beds, and which at the same time would impel the poor to curse the existence that was doomed to be dragged on in those cold and cheerless garrets where not even a mattress protected the shivering limbs from the hard floor!

For upwards of five minutes had Caroline Walters stood at the window, courting as it were the nipping chill of the wind to cool her brain which seemed to be on fire, and her blood which appeared to circulate like lightning in her veins; when, at the expiration of that brief interval, she heard a neighbouring window gently and slowly open.

Scarcely had this sound fallen upon her ear, when the conviction flashed to her mind that it was the casement of the adjacent room—*the young lady's chamber*—which was thus opening,—and while she was still listening with breathless attention, the faint, feeble, and half-stifled cry of a new-born child was wafted to her through the air.

In the next moment that cry was heard the least thing louder; and immediately afterwards it rose into a small shrill shriek: then there was a plash in the waters beneath,—a sound distinct from the ripplings against the piles, and which seemed as if something had been thrown into the river;—and at the same instant the window of the next room was shut down!

If a scorpion had suddenly twined itself about the neck of Caroline Walters, a more horrible feeling could not have come over her than the sensation which now seized upon her brain—her heart—her entire being. For to her startled soul rushed the appalling conviction that a foul and atrocious murder had just been perpetrated,—the murder of a babe whose eyes had scarcely opened in this world ere they were closed again in the night of death,—and that death inflicted, perhaps—nay, most probably—with the cognizance of the victim's own mother!

Staggering away from the window, the young woman fell upon her knees by the side of her bed; and yielding to the deep agony of feelings so intensely wrung, she buried her face in her hands and endeavoured to pray. But her thoughts grew bewildered—her ideas became confused—and a frightful consternation seized upon her. Rising slowly, she mechanically closed the window, and began to lay aside her clothing;—and had the candle been still burning and she could have caught a glimpse of her features in the mirror, she would have shrunk back in dismay from the reflection of the ghastly pallor of her countenance, the strange unnatural vacancy of her eyes, and the ashy whiteness of her quivering lips.

But it was dark now within that chamber,—dark as the air without,—dark, too, as the deed which characterised this night of terror!

Caroline Walters sought her couch—and sleep soon fell upon her eyes: for she was worn out and exhausted with the overwhelming fatigues which the body had sustained from the mind's incessant workings and convulsive agitations during the last hour. But though slumber thus sealed her heavy lids,—yet to her bosom there came no rest; for even in her dreams was she pursued by the horrors that had appalled her soul ere she lay down to repose.

Yes—and even in her visions, too, it seemed as if an oath of vengeance sprang from her very heart's core,—of vengeance against *him* who had seduced and betrayed her—and against that old demoness in female shape who had perpetrated the tremendous tragedy of this foul night.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRINCE, TIM MEAGLES, AND LADY LETITIA LADE.

WHILE the scenes just related were taking place at the abode of Mrs. Lindley in Fore Street, Lambeth, a conversation replete with interest in regard to our tale, was progressing at Carlton House.

It was about ten o'clock on that night of tempest and of crime, when the Prince of Wales, having quitted the dinner-table in another apartment of his magnificent dwelling, retired to his private chamber, which we have already described in a preceding chapter. Germain, his faithful French valet, was waiting there for any farther instructions which his royal master might have to give; but the Prince, having satisfied himself with a glance at the table that everything requisite had been provided, dismissed his dependant with orders to serve up supper at midnight.

Germain bowed and withdrew; and when he had disappeared, the Prince locked the door by which the man had retired, and immediately afterwards unfastened the one leading to the private staircase. Having done this, the Prince approached the table which was spread with a varied assortment of delicious wines, preserved and hot-house fruits, and cakes of several descriptions; and filling a large glass with claret, he tossed off the contents. Then, throwing himself into an easy chair, the Prince began to hum a tune, in the midst of which occupation he was interrupted by the approach of footsteps on the private stairs.

In a few moments Tim Meagles made his appearance, ushering in the Amazon, as on the previous occasion when we introduced him to the Prince's bed-chamber.

The lady was attired in the same manner as we then described: but, if possible, she was still handsomer—for the cold wind had so heightened the na-

turally healthy hues of her complexion that she seemed radiant with animation. Nevertheless, his Royal Highness could not restrain a movement of impatience when he observed that his friend Meagles had brought her thither again: but the volatile Tim, hastening forward, whispered in the Prince's ear, "I know what you want to see me for—and Lady Letitia can help you."

The countenance of George brightened up immediately; and, rising from his seat, he gave the Amazon a cordial welcome.

Throwing aside her hat and riding-whip, and taking a chair, Lady Letitia Lade smoothed down her glossy black hair and arranged her luxuriant ringlets, exclaiming, "This wind plays the very devil with one's curls. I really think I shall have them cut off altogether."

"It were the veriest sacrilege perpetrated against Nature's shrine of loveliness that a Vandal imagination could possibly conceive," observed the Prince, smiling.

"Egad! that's the prettiest turned compliment I ever heard fall from your lips, my dear Prince," said Meagles; "but I perfectly agree with you in the opinion which it implies."

"Hold your tongue, Tim!" cried the Amazon, laughing so as to display thirty-two of the whitest teeth, which were all perfect as to number and without a speck or blemish; so that no one could complain of the somewhat large mouth which thus revealed the brilliant array. "With the permission of your Royal Highness, I shall help myself," continued Lady Letitia: "for, in spite of your cheerful fire the flames of which go roaring up the chimney like a broken-winded horse pressed into a gallop, I still feel cold—and a glass of your excellent Madeira will warm me."

"This is Liberty Hall, my dear huntress," said the Prince; "and therefore I shall not even adopt the ceremonious courtesy of filling your glass for you."

"By Jove! she can fill it for herself—and empty it too," cried Tim Meagles—an observation which gained him a smart box on the ear from Lady Letitia.

"Do you treat Sir John in that fashion?" demanded the Prince, laughing.

"Poor old gentleman! he is well nigh in his dotage," said the Amazon. "He let's me do just as I like——"

"And if he didn't, you'd do it all the same," remarked Tim.

"Most assuredly," responded the huntress. "But as he is indulgent and good, we never have any quarrels. He only sees with my eyes and hears with my ears; and thus we live happily enough together."

"You are particularly fortunate," observed the Prince. "But we must now proceed to business, Meagles. We have two clear hours before us to chat—and supper will be served at twelve."

"I can guess what you require," said Tim: "but I suppose your wants are not very pressing—or else you would not have sent up a note to my lodgings last evening, postponing our appointment until to-night."

"The fact is that four-and-twenty hours made no material difference, as affairs stood," rejoined the Prince of Wales: "but as they *now* stand, another four-and-twenty hours must not be allowed to pass away without seeing my coffers replenished."

"What is the matter, then?" demanded Meagles. "Anything particularly pressing?"

"That poor devil Foster, who lent me the fifteen thousand pounds, you know—upon my simple note of hand—three years ago——" began the Prince of Wales, speaking hurriedly.

"Why! I thought your Royal Highness had settled it last Christmas twelvemonth," interrupted Meagles. "Did I not make an arrangement with him for you?—and did I not even find you the money to hand over to him? He agreed to receive the principal, and waive all claim to the twenty-five per cent. interest."

"It is perfectly true, my dear Meagles," resumed George, as he sipped his wine, "that you did everything you have just stated: but it is equally true that the money which you procured for me on that occasion, went into some other channel."

"And yet you never mentioned that circumstance to me until now," observed Tim, somewhat reproachfully. "How can I possibly undertake to settle these kinds of things for your Royal Highness, when you constantly act in a different manner from what I suggest or arrange, and then leave me completely in the dark?"

"I do not consider that you have a right to catechise me thus, Mr. Meagles," said the Prince, haughtily. "If it be irksome or unpleasant to you to attend occasionally to my business ——"

"Irksome and unpleasant be hanged!" exclaimed Tim. "What I meant was, that your Royal Highness places me in such a position at times that I should look like a fool were I, for instance, to meet this man Foster ——"

"The fact is," interrupted Lady Letitia, "Tim Meagles is anxious never to look otherwise than like a sapient fellow, as he is."

"A thousand thanks, my dear huntress, for taking my part!" exclaimed the Prince, now thinking it politic to resume his good humour. "Come, Meagles—give me your best attention—and let us see what can be done in this difficulty."

"We shall be sure to overcome it," remarked Tim, quite satisfied with the little amount of independent spirit which he had just shown, and which was only displayed for the purpose of disarming Lady Letitia of any suspicion that she might have formed to the effect that he was nothing more than the Prince's servile toad-eater and did not dare to call his soul his own. "Pray proceed, my illustrious friend: I am all attention."

"Well, you must know that this unfortunate fellow Foster is on the very verge of bankruptcy—*that's* what I think they call it amongst trading people," continued his Royal Highness, with a supercilious smile of contempt for that mighty industrious class upon whose hard earnings and incessant toils the unprincipled voluptuary was living in a luxurious indolence and an execrable dissipation. "It appears," proceeded the Prince, "that Foster has met with sad reverses, and that unless he can pay a sum of between fourteen and fifteen thousand pounds by three o'clock to-morrow, he will be irremediably ruined. Now, the fact is that the other evening I agreed to meet him at the very tavern where three years ago he lent me the cash; for you know that I have a desperate aversion to any of those tradesmen-fellows setting foot within these walls."

"And very proper too," remarked the Amazon, totally unmindful of the little circumstance that she

was born of parents who were beggars, and in a miserable garret in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's.

"Well," resumed the Prince, "I went to the place of appointment—it was the George and Blue Boar, Holborn; and on arriving there, I ordered the landlord, who immediately recognised me, to show me to a private room. Conceive my annoyance when I learnt that there was not an apartment unoccupied throughout the establishment: the entire building was full of guests. Even the landlord's own parlour was engaged for a supper-party. There was no help for it—and I was compelled to repair to the commercial-room, having previously informed the landlord that if any one called to inquire for a Mr. Jenkins, the individual was to be conducted straight to me. I had not been long seated in the travellers' room, as they call it, when I observed, as I was sipping my rum punch, that an insolent rascal of a bagman was surveying me in a very peculiar fashion; and he presently had the impertinence to intimate that he was not unaware who I was. Vainly did I endeavour to rebuke him by reminding him that the mere fact of my being there at all was a sufficient indication of my desire to escape vulgar notice: the scoundrel was unabashed, and boldly declared that my words had confirmed his suspicion relative to my identity. Indignant and disgusted—repenting, too, of my folly in going thither under any circumstances whatsoever—and observing by the clock that it was considerably past the hour when Foster was to meet me, I quitted the tavern abruptly: but knowing how absolutely necessary it was to make immediate arrangements with that same Foster, in order to prevent him from calling and dunning at Carlton House, I resolved to proceed to his own private residence. I accordingly took a hackney-coach in Holborn: but when some distance up the Edgeware Road, in which neighbourhood Foster dwells, I became aware that I was pursued. Instantly suspecting some freak arising from the impertinence of the bagman—and fearing lest a disturbance might ensue and obtain publicity, thereby causing unpleasant mention to be made of my name—I alighted, dismissed the coach, and took refuge in the nearest house."

"A very unpleasant little adventure," observed Lady Letitia, laughing heartily.

"I only wish that I had been with your Royal Highness," said Tim Meagles: "that same insolent bagman should not have escaped with a whole skin. But the end of it was, I suppose, that you failed to see Foster altogether?"

"Precisely so," answered the Prince. "And now, to make a long story short, I have received a letter from Foster, respectfully apologising for being too late to meet me the other night at the tavern, but assuring me that he is a ruined man unless he can pay a certain mercantile firm in Wood Street the sum of fourteen thousand five hundred pounds by three o'clock to-morrow. Now, can anything be done, Tim?" inquired the Prince anxiously: "for I pledge you my royal honour that I know not whence to procure half the amount. My name is already talked about in so scandalous a manner—my immense liabilities are as notorious as they well can be—and my position, in fact, is so extremely disagreeable at this moment, that I would make any sacrifice to be enabled to settle this Foster's claim. Only conceive, my dear friends," added the Prince, looking first at Meagles and then at the Amazon,—"only conceive what a terrible exposure it would be, if Foster was to become bankrupt and in his vexation should proclaim me as the cause of his failure!"

"Can your friend manage it in time, Letitia?" asked Meagles, turning towards the huntress.

"As early to-morrow as his Royal Highness may choose to appoint," was the lady's reply.

"The fact is this," resumed Tim, addressing himself to the Prince: "our Amazonian beauty here has captivated a French Marquis——"

"No scandal, Meagles!" interrupted the huntress. "The Marquis de Saint Croix is a friend of Sir John's—and in that capacity he has visited at our house. He is one of those noble refugees who have been compelled to seek an asylum in England, to avoid the guillotine in their own country."

"Perdition seize those miscreants of French Republicans!" ejaculated the Prince of Wales, suddenly becoming much excited. "Their pestilential doctrines are making vast progress here: "but, thank God! we possess generals who will not hesitate to cannonade the people at the first symptom of a rising. Nevertheless, Royalty has begun to fall to a discount——"

"Your Royal Highness is wrong to suppose that such is the case in England," observed Meagles. "The aristocracy has got such a tight hold upon the millions that a convulsion here is impossible."

"Well—at all events, the throne will last my time out," observed the Prince; "and I don't care one damn what follows!"*

"Oh! leave politics alone for the present," exclaimed Lady Letitia; "and let us return to the matter whence you have both digressed. The Marquis de Saint Croix, of whom I was speaking, is an old nobleman of very venerable appearance; and he has quite won Sir John's heart. The consequence is that he is a frequent visitor at our house, as I just now observed; and a few days ago he was saying that he had succeeded in bringing away with him, from his native land, a sum of not less than twenty thousand pounds. He is anxious to lay out his money to the best advantage, and consulted my husband upon the subject. Sir John replied that he would mention the business to his solicitor, who might probably know where to place the amount on some safe mortgage, and at good interest. I happened to mention this circumstance to our friend Meagles——"

"And I immediately suggested that perhaps your Royal Highness would like to take up the sum," added Tim. "Letitia says that she can manage it easily, and without delay."

"And what security can I possibly give the Marquis?" inquired George.

"Your Royal Highness's bond will doubtless be sufficient," answered Meagles.

"And the French nobleman will rejoice in having deposited his money in such good hands," observed the Amazon. "He will consider the transaction as a guarantee for the continuation of that hospitality and protection which England has already vouchsafed not only to himself, but to so many thousands of his refugee fellow-countrymen."

"But the affair must be managed with the utmost secrecy," said the Prince. "How can you even prevent your husband, Sir John Lade, from knowing it?"

* George the Fourth, when Prince of Wales, really did make use of these very words.

"Leave that to me," returned the Amazon. "If your Royal Highness shall think fit to embrace the proposal, I will undertake to bring the Marquis de Saint Croix hither to-morrow, at any specified hour—a bond can be already prepared, blanks being left for the names of lender and borrower and the amount to be thus advanced—and all can be settled in a few minutes."

"I cannot possibly refuse so excellent an offer, my dear huntress," answered the Prince. "We will say at one o'clock to-morrow: there will, then, be plenty of time to forward the fifteen thousand pounds to Foster, as he is not compelled to make his payment before three."

This matter being so far settled to the satisfaction of his Royal Highness, the conversation turned upon other topics, and the wine circulated freely—Lady Letitia by no means sparing the light vintage of France.

At midnight the Prince desired Tim Meagles to unlock the door communicating with the ante-room; and Germain almost immediately made his appearance, followed by two footmen bearing the supper-trays.

When the table was spread, and the two subordinate lacqueys had retired, Germain said to the Prince, "May it please your Royal Highness, a very obtrusive person called about an hour ago, and insisted upon obtaining an interview with your Royal Highness."

"Did he give his name?" demanded the Prince, his countenance flushing with indignation.

"He announced himself as a Mr. Foster," was the reply. "But knowing that your Royal Highness was engaged, I would not on any account permit him to enter farther than the hall."

"Did the porters overhear anything that he said, Germain?" inquired George.

"It was in consequence of a species of altercation which took place between him and them, that I was summoned to the hall, may it please your Royal Highness."

"And what—what did the insolent fellow dare to say in the hearing of my menials?" demanded the Prince, now stammering with the excitement and irritability that were gaining upon him.

"Nothing more than that it would be ruin to him unless he either obtained an audience or received an answer to a letter which he had addressed a day or two ago to your Royal Highness," responded Germain, who throughout this colloquy had spoken in the subdued tone of the profoundest respect, and as if he were only relating a very ordinary and commonplace occurrence, instead of something so exceedingly derogatory to his master.

"That will do," said the Prince; "you may retire. "My dear friends," he continued, as soon as the valet had withdrawn, "you perceive how these insolent City people dun you to death if you happen to put them to any little trifling inconvenience. But, thanks to your project, my sweet huntress, Tim Meagles will be enabled to take Foster his money to-morrow—and I shall be freed from all alarm on the part of this pestering trader. So we will think no more about him for the present—but only study how to enjoy ourselves for the next two or three hours to come."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TOO LATE!

"ANY little trifling inconvenience!"—these were the words that the Prince of Wales applied to the ruinous embarrassments into which he himself had been the means of plunging a highly respectable merchant of the City of London!

And it is always with similar levity that the aristocracy speak of the applications made to them by their tradesmen for money, no matter how long it may have been owing. In their estimation they confer an honour upon the shopkeepers with whom they deal; and therefore the vile plebeians must await their patrician convenience! What—dare to ask for payment of a bill—or even a small sum on account? Who ever heard of such insolence? Withdraw your custom immediately, ye proud ones, from such unmannerly fellows! What is it to you if such timely liquidation would rescue an industrious, hard-working man from bankruptcy and his children from the workhouse?—what is it to you if even the regular payments of your bills would save honest traders from the most cruel embarrassments?—what is it to you if the whole community of artizans, mechanics, and operatives be doomed to suffer, throughout its various ramifications and in all its manifold sections, in consequence of your want of punctuality? Nothing—nothing; you care not a straw for the miseries which ye thus entail upon the world of industry!

Show us a class of persons, on the face of God Almighty's earth, more thoroughly heartless than the English aristocracy. No—you cannot! There exists not an oligarchy in the world so devoid of proper feelings as that which comprises the nobility and the fashion of this realm. Talk of the donations which they make to charitable institutions—it is a despicable farce! They only give where they know their names will be proclaimed by canting saints at Exeter Hall, or published in the columns of the daily newspapers. And even if they were really charitable and truly bounteous,—even if they gave largely to the deserving poor, and dispensed gold by handfuls in secret benevolence,—they would only be rendering back to the people a portion of that inordinate wealth which they derive from the thews, sinews, fibres, vitals, and heart's blood of the toiling—wretched—starving millions!

"Any little trifling inconvenience!"—and yet thousands of respectable tradesmen have been ruined by the disgraceful delays of their aristocratic customers and patrons in liquidating their accounts. How much misery has the Duke of York caused in this manner? And yet a column is erected to his memory! Is it not a Column of Infamy?

While the Prince of Wales was uttering those words — "any little trifling inconvenience" — a wretched, broken-hearted, despairing man was returning to his home in the Edgeware Road. *Home!*—how often had that delightful name cheered John Foster's spirits as he breathed it to himself while toiling at his desk in the City!—how often had the thought of that home inspired him with energy and courage to pass through the laborious routine of the day, by holding forth the delightful assurance that happy faces and a social hearth would await his return to his own abode in the evening!

But now,—*now*, as he was wending his way back

to that dwelling,—he felt that it could no longer be called his home. For a home means something stationary, fixed, and permanent—not precarious and liable to be snatched away in a moment,—a place of one's own choosing, and to which there is a certainty of returning to-morrow and next day, even as one returns to it to-day,—a tenement around whose walls the eye may glance with the satisfaction of knowing that everything contained within their boundary is one's own. Whether it be a single apartment, or a lordly mansion, it is nevertheless a home so long as the conviction lasts that no man can deprive you of it—no one thrusts you forth at will—no rude hand lay its gripe upon the beds, the chairs, and the tables which it contains.

Therefore was it that, as the wretched John Foster, retraced his way to the house in which he had dwelt for so many years, he no longer considered it to be his *home!* No: ruin was imminent,—total, irremediable, unmitigated ruin;—and bankruptcy would sweep away his furniture—bankruptcy would sell the lease of his house—and bankruptcy would turn him, his wife, and his daughter into the streets!

Wretched—wretched man!—how had he deserved this hard fate? From his youth upward had he toiled unwearicdly,—first to make his way in the world—next to maintain the position he had achieved for himself—then to improve it—and lastly to sustain it against the difficulties which sprang up, through various causes, around him. Beginning life with nothing, he had succeeded at the age of thirty in exchanging the servitude of a clerkship for the independence of a master: at forty he married a woman who brought him a tolerable sum of money;—at fifty he was rising to opulence—at fifty-five he was enabled to lend the Prince of Wales fifteen thousand pounds, being all the money he had succeeded in putting by during his life of industry—and at fifty-eight, the failure of several eminent houses had so embarrassed his own resources that he was trembling on the verge of bankruptcy.

Messrs. Hodson and Morley, of Wood Street, Cheapside, had threatened to strike a docket against him. Vainly had he besought more time—none was granted. A greedy lawyer, anxious for a job, was employed against him; and, as no character is more estimable than an honest attorney, so none is more execrable than a griping pettifogger. Foster's only resource lay in the money which the Prince owed him. Were that repaid, he could settle the only pressing liability he had in the world; and thereby gaining time to collect his assets which were far greater than his debts, he would continue to hold up his head as a prosperous merchant.

We have seen that he unfortunately missed his appointment with the Prince at the George and Blue Boar. And yet we hardly know whether we be justified in using the term "unfortunately;" for his Royal Highness could not have paid him, had they met. Next we find him addressing a respectful letter to the Prince,—humbly imploring the restoration of his money: not appealing to the *honesty*, but to the *humanity* of his royal debtor;—not confidently demanding his own, as a right, but servilely beseeching payment as a boon. For this is the manner in which Princes must be addressed—and they are not *letters* which you write to them, but *petitions!*

But to that appeal no answer was returned. It was quite sufficient if his Royal Highness deigned to give the subject a thought: how could he be expected to trouble himself so far as to pen a reply? Driven almost to desperation—perceiving Ruin standing in his presence, with only the interval of a few short hours—and having his heart filled with a boundless sympathy for that wife who for eighteen years had been a true and faithful companion to him, and for that daughter of sixteen who was so beautiful and innocent, and whom he loved so fondly,—the merchant had at length resolved to call at Carlton House. Thither he repaired; and, in a mild and respectful voice, solicited a few moments' audience of the Prince. The hall-porters judged that he was a dun, and met his civility with coarse and brutal insult. Still did John Foster preserve his temper: still did he forbear to utter anything disrespectful towards the Prince;—but he implored one of the insolent, powdered, and lace-bedizened menials to bear a message to his Royal Highness. The request was refused with a positive ruffianism of manner;—and Foster, sinking upon one of the chairs in the marble hall, gave way to his grief. Then was it that Germain was sent for; and the merchant, addressing that valet with as much respect as if he were a great lord and Foster himself a grovelling beggar, earnestly besought either an instant's audience of the Prince or an answer to a letter which he had previously forwarded. Germain declared that it was impossible to disturb his royal master at that hour: but he spoke in a respectful—almost kind tone. Then was it that Foster, driven to despair, exclaimed that he should be ruined unless one or the other of his requests was granted. Germain still refused to interfere—and the merchant dragged himself away from the princely dwelling, in a state of mind which it is scarcely possible to explain.

Oh! there are times when the brain reels with a sense of misery—misery—misery, from which no means of escape appear, and to which no relief can come,—times when the soul is filled with an anguish beyond the limits of the imagination to conceive, and when every chord in the heart is so distended that it feels as if the whole must give way at once and the victim be stricken down in sudden death, as if by the thunderbolt of apoplexy!

Such were the sensations of the merchant as he mechanically pursued his way homeward. Though his dwelling was at some considerable distance, he thought not of taking a vehicle. A vehicle indeed! What—when he could see RUIN staring at him with its spectral eyes—preceding him, with its ghastly countenance turned towards him—following him—walking on his right hand and on his left—hemming him in, as it were, with that terrible influence which made it appear of multiform shape! And as he threaded the crowded streets,—walking on like a drunken man, unconscious which way he was pursuing, yet mechanically taking the direct route,—he beheld not the people who jostled him—heard not the gibes which thoughtless young men threw at him—noticed not the frail girls who saluted him with obscene jests—marked not the carriages sweeping along the thoroughfares which he crossed: no—nothing did he see save the gaunt, spectral, and terrific form of RUIN;—nothing did he hear but the silent voice which thundered through his brain the deafening word "RUINED!"

It was midnight when he reached his house,

which was only at a short distance from Paradise Villas. Lights gleamed from the parlour-windows —and he knew that anxious hearts were beating within. For he had no secrets from his wife and daughter: they knew all—and now they were waiting to know the worst. But he paused on the steps for upwards of two minutes ere he could command the courage and the energy sufficient to raise his hand to the knocker. How could he meet them face to face, and say, "I am ruined?"—how could he encounter their earnest, inquiring gaze, and proclaim that hope was gone? For doubtless they were hoping still;—yes—and cheering each other, —mother and daughter each striving and straining her utmost to sustain the spirits of the other! My God—how could he cast the blight of despair upon all those tender sympathies—those pious assurances—those holy consolations? Yet it must be done: sooner or later the blow would arrive—sooner or later must the storm of ruin level the castles which hope was building on the unstable sand that it mistook for a firm rock! Oh! unhappy—doomed family!

Foster knocked at the door—and immediately afterwards his ear caught the rustling of dresses and the rapid tread of light feet in the hall within. The door was opened hastily—anxious voices welcomed him, and in the same breath inquired what news he had brought: and he remained standing motionless on the threshold—and spoke no word. For before him were his wife and daughter—the two beings whom he loved so well, and to save whose hearts a pang he would cheerfully lay down his existence,—aye—and smile in the midst of that self-martyrdom!

The light of the hall-lamp fell upon his countenance—and they saw that it spoke terrible things. Then they knew the worst!

Now, had he entered in an excited manner and at once proclaimed the full extent of *his* misery—which was also *their* misery—they would doubtless have burst into a violent ebullition of grief. But when they saw that *he*—the husband and the father—was as it were stunned and stupified by the immensity of the sorrow that weighed upon him, they instantly revealed themselves in the true nature of Woman—blessed Woman!—and became comforters and consolers.

"Dearest—dearest husband," murmured the wife, endeavouring to smile,—"all may not be as bad as you apprehend!"

"Beloved father," whispered the daughter, succeeding in *her* attempt to smile—but it was through glistening tears; "you have given me a good education—I possess accomplishments—and I can work to maintain us all!"

Then the full tide of ineffable emotions rushed to the heart of the ruined merchant who was so tenderly adjured by a wife and so affectionately addressed by a daughter;—and entering the house he folded them both in his embrace, and wept over them plenteously! But such was the state of his mind that those tears gave him no real relief: they only forced his sorrow to take, as it were, a new phase—for inasmuch as he had been stupified and stunned by its weight before, he was now writhing with an anguish that penetrated into the lowest confines of his being. Even though smiles had expanded over him like sunlight, they would only have served to bring into stronger relief the desert-like desolation of that future on which those whom he loved so well were about to enter.

Mastering, however, his emotions as well as he was able, Foster described the failure of his visit to Carlton House. Then came from his wife's lips the tremulous, hesitating question whether Hodson and Morley would not accord him a farther delay.

"No—not an hour—not a minute!" answered the merchant, almost distracted; and he dashed his open palm violently against his brow.

"My dearest husband," said Mrs. Foster, "there is One above who hears our words and watches our ways; and if it should please Him to rescue us from ruin, penury, and want, even at the last instant will succour and salvation come."

But the afflicted man shook his head despairingly: his sorrow was too great for the consolations of religion.

His daughter—a lovely girl of sixteen, and to whom her fond parents had given the sweet name of Rose, as if in her earliest infancy they foresaw the beauty into which the then delicate flower was destined to expand,—this charming creature, we say, now exerted all the influence of the tenderest endearments and all the power of language to solace her distressed father. But suddenly his countenance grew strange and fearful: then a wild laughter wavered upon his lips—and, springing from his seat, he began to toss his arms about and rave as if in the fever of a delirium.

His wife and daughter threw themselves on their knees before him, and besought him to be calm. This touching spectacle and still more earnest appeal produced an almost instantaneous effect upon him: the wild laughter and the indistinct ravings were speedily lost in profound sobbings and suffocating sighs—and these were in their turn subdued by copious weeping and quenched by floods of tears.

Considerably tranquillised, Mr. Foster at length suffered himself to be conducted to his chamber. Sleep fell upon him: but his misfortunes pursued him in his dreams—and he awoke at an early hour, unrefreshed. He raised his heavy eye-lids—and the first objects his languid looks encountered were his wife and daughter. They had not retired to rest all night: their patient, holy, and affectionate vigil had been wakefully kept!

Oh! who can estimate the devotion of woman?—who can define a limit to her generous sympathies? Unto what can we liken the boundless love of which her heart is susceptible? To the elastic air which is capable of an expansion so vast that a cubic inch may dilate to a volume filling all space, infinite though it be! Yes—to the air, so falsely called empty, let us assimilate woman's love. For even as that same atmosphere is filled with the perfume of flowers a million times mingled, so is woman's love fraught with all those sentiments of the soul that are in themselves a delicious essence and a fragrant balm:—again, as the air becomes the medium of wafting all the harmonies of nature to the ear, so is woman's love breathed in melodious tones, combining all the modulations of her tenderest sensibilities;—and, lastly, even as the atmosphere is radiant with the lustre of the orb of day, so does woman's love diffuse its brightness from beaming eyes and in sunny smiles!

Oh! thou vile, ruthless ruffian that could raise thine hand against a woman!—Oh! thou black-

hearted wretch that could remain unmoved by the tears which thine own ill-treatment has provoked! Knowest thou not what woman's love is? It would prompt her to die for thee—to lay down her life to save thine or the lives of her children? She has her faults, her failings, and her caprices: but, O man! pardon them—pardon them—for they are as nothing in comparison with her devotion, her affection, and her tenderness. As a grain of mustard seed is to the whole earth, so are woman's foibles to her love! But you will point out bad wives—profligate daughters and sisters—abandoned mothers? Alas—alas, it is true—too true: but ask thyself, O Man! who made them thus?—who reduced those wretched creatures to what they are? The reply, if truly given, recoils with a crushing weight of terrible accusation upon thyself! For 'tis *thou* who hast worked all that infernal mischief. Take the vilest of the vile—the most loathsome of the loathsome forms of vice whose features bear the vivid impress of dissipation and debauchery,—and trace this lost one's history of crime back to that moment when virgin innocence was wrecked in guilty enjoyment, and thou wilt hear a tale of fervent love on *her* part and cruel deception on that of the seducer! Yes—'tis thou, O Man! who art the most ruthless enemy and the most unrelenting oppressor of that sex to proclaim whose wrongs we have more than once ventured to wield our pen, feeble and ineffectual though our championship may be!

But let us resume the thread of our narrative.

Foster, the ruined merchant, awoke unrefreshed from his slumbers; and when his eyes fell upon the pale and care-worn countenances of those who were so dear to him, he endeavoured to smile his gratitude for the vigil which he saw they had been keeping. But, heavens! so full of vacancy and woe was his smile, that it told too plainly of a mind fast fading with the heart that was breaking within! Both wife and daughter beheld that terrible indication of the mortal shock which he whom they adored had received: but they dared not look at each other, lest they should betray the agonising fears that were now uppermost in their mind.

Mr. Foster rose—performed his toilette with a precision that was habitual, and therefore mechanical in the present instance—and descended to the breakfast-table. He endeavoured to appear tranquil and composed: but the tremendous efforts which he thus made to conceal all that he felt, were only concentrating his emotions with a maddening effect. His wife and daughter implored him not to leave home that day: they dared not offer to accompany him into the City—and they could not suffer him to repair thither alone. With a ghastly look, he murmured an assent to their prayer—adding in a low and hollow tone, "It would be useless even if I were to go!"

The morning wore away—heaven knows how! We cannot pause to conjecture all the feelings and emotions experienced during the few hours which followed the ceremony of sitting down to a breakfast that was removed almost untasted. To attempt such a description would be to undertake the task of showing how human beings can live whole ages of pain and anguish in as many minutes: it would be to depict each throb of a pulse violent with the agitation of delirium—to note each tremor which passed through veins wherein lightning seemed to circulate—and to describe all the spectral shadows which rested upon souls goaded to despair!

As three o'clock in the afternoon drew nigh, Mr. Foster's excitement became intolerable. He first began to pace the room with uneven steps, as if his brain were swimming round: then he wandered about the house like a restless spirit. His sorrowing wife and the equally afflicted Rose dared not follow him: they feared to increase the terrible irritability that was gaining so rapidly upon him.

At length three o'clock struck;—and at that moment the ladies were in the parlour on the ground-floor—while Mr. Foster was moving about in the upper part of the house. The door of the parlour was open—and the two unhappy females sate listening in breathless silence: for every time the sounds of the merchant's footsteps ceased to be heard by them—if only for a few moments—a mortal terror seized upon them. And yet they dared not reveal to each other, even by a look, the dreadful apprehensions which they mutually felt.

Presently—soon after the clock in the kitchen had struck thrice—Mr. Foster was heard to enter his dressing-room. His wife knew that he had pistols there; and, unable any longer to restrain herself, she rushed from the parlour. Rose, animated with a poignant sympathy, hastened to follow her;—and the two ladies were hurrying up the stairs, when the report of fire-arms fell upon their ears. A scream burst from the lips of each: but still they ran—they flew to the dressing-room!

And there—great God! what a spectacle met their horrified vision! He whom they loved was no more. Stretched upon the carpet, with his head frightfully shattered, lay the desperate suicide; while the thin white smoke was curling in wreaths towards the ceiling—and the air was impregnated with the smell of the powder.

With a piercing scream, Rose threw herself upon the corpse of her sire and gave way to all the anguish of her indescribable grief. But the effect produced upon Mrs. Foster was different:—for a few moments—nay, for nearly a minute did she stand transfixed upon the threshold of the chamber—her eyes bent with an awful wildness upon the scene before her. Then, suddenly a rending—thrilling—penetrating shriek burst from her lips,—a lengthened vibration as the heart's chords broke in twain; and she fell headlong—a lifeless corpse by the side of her husband.

At this moment the servants entered the room; and Rose was borne away, in a senseless state, to her own chamber.

But scarcely had one of the domestics begun to administer restoratives to the unfortunate girl who had thus suddenly been made an orphan, when a loud double knock at the door called down the other dependant to answer the imperious summons.

The arrival was Mr. Meagles, who came as the bearer of the money which was to satisfy the merchant's claim upon the Prince. The Amazon had introduced the Marquis of Saint Croix to his Royal Highness's private apartment at the very moment that the clock was striking one—and in less than a quarter of an hour the bond was signed and the cash paid down. But the Prince was so much pleased with the old French nobleman that he insisted upon his staying to partake of lunch; and when Tim

Meagles suggested the propriety of devoting immediate attention to Foster's business, the Prince exclaimed flippantly, "Oh! an hour more or less will not make any difference to the vulgar trader: you must stay and take a glass of wine, Tim—and then you shall go." Meagles was forced to comply with his patron's desire; and it was two o'clock ere he quitted Carlton House to go into the City. But having a good horse to his gig, he speedily accomplished the distance between the princely dwelling and the merchant's counting-house. Here he learnt that Mr. Foster had not been in town all day;—and he therefore resolved to proceed at once to the Edgeware Road.

We have however seen that he reached Mr. Foster's private residence *too late!* And now he learnt, with unfeigned horror, the terrible tragedy that had taken place, and which had deprived a young and beautiful girl of both her parents all in a moment.

Meagles entered the house—visited the scene of suicide and sudden death—and, hearing that Miss Foster had by this time recovered her senses, solicited a few moments' interview with her. The man was naturally good-hearted; and the incidents which had just occurred, not only shocked him cruelly, but likewise created in his bosom a feeling of interest with regard to the fatherless and motherless maiden. The servant informed the half-distracted young lady that a gentleman who appeared to sympathize deeply with her sorrows, desired to see her; and she was accordingly persuaded to grant the request.

In a few minutes, therefore, Meagles beheld a tall, graceful, and very lovely girl enter the drawing-room, to which he had been shown; and, although she was nearly overwhelmed with a sense of the tremendous affliction that had fallen upon her, yet was he struck by the beauty of her countenance and the sylph-like elegance of her form.

"Miss Foster," he said, approaching her, and speaking in a low and tremulous tone, "I dare not offer a word of consolation. Were I your friend, I should venture to do so—were I your brother, I should naturally undertake the task. But being a stranger—an utter stranger—I can only say, and with truth, that I never was so profoundly affected in all my life."

Rose bent upon him a look which expressed the deep gratitude she experienced for this manifestation of sympathy: but she was unable to utter a word. Her feelings choked her; and, sinking upon a seat, she burst into tears.

Meagles suffered her to weep without interruption for several minutes, during which she forgot that he was present; and at length raising her countenance —which was as lovely as loveliness could make it, but pale with indescribable woe—she remembered that he had begged to see her upon some matter of importance. Observing that the look which she cast towards him assumed an expression of inquiry—for her heart was still too full to speak—he hastened to explain his business in as few words as possible. But the communication of the fact that he had brought the money with him, only revived her grief in all its bitter intensity: for it struck her in an instant that had he come but five minutes earlier, all—all that had happened would have been spared, and those whom she had lost would be yet alive!

Again, therefore, was she overwhelmed with sorrow for several minutes: but, at length recovering a sufficiency of composure to address a few words to her visitor, she said in a low and stifling tone, "There remains a duty to be performed to the memory of my father. His name must not be disgraced, even after death. The money which you have brought was destined for a certain purpose—and that purpose must be accomplished. Do you understand me, sir?"

"You mean the payment of a particular debt, Miss Foster?" observed Meagles. "Give me the address of those harsh creditors, and I will hasten to them without delay."

Rose mentioned the names of Hodson and Morley and their place of business; and Meagles was already about to leave the room, when a thought suddenly struck him. There would be a Coroner's inquest on the bodies—and the name of the Prince might transpire in connexion with the causes that led to the merchant's deplorable suicide!

Turning towards the young lady, he said in the kindest tone that he could command, "But is there no other duty to be performed towards the memory of your deceased father? Must the world become acquainted with the—the ——"

"I understand you, sir—and, Oh! I thank you—sincerely thank you!" exclaimed Rose, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "But is it possible?—can the truth be concealed in this instance?"

"If you, Miss Foster, can rely upon your servants," answered Meagles, "I will undertake that neither the Coroner nor the parish authorities shall exhibit any impertinent curiosity to pry into a secret which ought to be religiously kept."

The afflicted girl extended her hand to Meagles as a proof of her gratitude for what she conceived to be a generous consideration on his part; and he therefore took his leave, with an intimation that he should return in the evening to report the interview with Hodson and Morley, and to give her any advice which she might require in the distressing circumstances in which she was placed.

Accordingly at the expiration of about three hours, Meagles called again, and was immediately admitted into Miss Foster's presence. He found her more calm and resigned; and it was a consolation to the poor orphan, even in the depth of such affliction as this, to learn that the debt was paid to the merchants in Wood Street, and that nothing was to be apprehended on the part of the Coroner. For the magic influence of the Prince's name had been effectually used by Meagles to ensure silence in that quarter, as well as with the parochial authorities.

It was natural that, situated as Rose Foster was, she should receive with attention and gratitude the advice which was now given to her by one whom she already looked upon as a friend sent by heaven to afford counsel and aid in her orphan and unprotected state. She accordingly permitted him to issue all the necessary instructions for the double funeral, which he proposed should take place as soon and as privately as possible; and ere he took leave of her that evening, he insisted upon her retaining in her own charge the few hundreds of pounds which were left out of the fifteen thousand after the liquidation of the debt due to Hodson and Morley.

It was past ten o'clock when Tim Meagles returned to Carlton House, where he immediately obtained a private interview with the Prince.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, observing that the countenance of his friend was troubled.

"The money was paid *too late!*" replied Meagles, in a sombre tone.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the Prince impatiently. "I suppose the poor devil has gone into the *Gazette*——eh?"

"He has gone to another world," answered Meagles; "and this affair does not constitute the finest chapter in the life of your Royal Highness."

"Explain yourself, man?" ejaculated the Prince, stamping his foot with increasing impatience and likewise through rage at the taunt so boldly thrown out against him.

"I mean that John Foster has blown his brains out—and that his wife has died of a broken heart," said Meagles, still speaking in a tone of reproach.

"By heaven! this is awkward," cried the Prince, turning pale. "There will be a Coroner's Inquest—a thorough exposure ——"

"No — I have stopped all *that*," interrupted Meagles. "I called upon the Coroner and said enough to induce him to take no notice of the affair: I likewise bribed the parish beadle, sexton, and clerk very heavily."

"Thank God!" exclaimed his Royal Highness: "you are an excellent fellow, Meagles! Of course you have not paid the money to the creditors? Well—perhaps it is better that the vulgar trader should have blown his brains out: it is fifteen thousand pounds saved—and you may keep a thousand for yourself, Tim."

"Indeed your Royal Highness is talking uncommonly fast," said Meagles, scarcely able to repress a feeling of disgust at the thorough heartlessness which the Prince was now exhibiting: "for how could we possibly hush up this most unpleasant affair, without paying Hodson and Morley's claim upon the deceased? *They* knew that your Royal Highness owed Foster the money."

"Ah! I see," observed the Prince, in a tone of vexation. "Well—it can't be helped, Tim. I have

just left half-a-dozen good fellows in the banquetting-room—and you shall join us. We intend to keep it up till three in the morning, and shall put your services in requisition for the curaçoa-punch. Come!"

"Your Royal Highness will excuse me this evening," said Meagles, who for the first time in his life felt indisposed to mix in conviviality.

"Ah! I presume you have some little love-affair in hand," exclaimed the royal voluptuary. "Well—I wish you success. Let me see you to-morrow."

And having shaken hands with his friend, the Prince returned to his companions in the banquetting-room, where he passed the greater portion of the night in dissipation: but during the many hours that thus elapsed, the heartless miscreant never once bestowed another thought upon the Fosters!

Tim Meagles retired to his own lodgings in a pensive mood, the image of the orphan Rose being uppermost in his mind.

But the reader will have observed that, during his interview with the Prince, he never once alluded to her, nor even intimated that there was such a being in existence!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TERRIBLE AND STRANGE REVELATIONS.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we shall find seated at the breakfast-table with his bride, at their lodgings in Southwark, the morning after the wedding-day.

Julia was dressed in a new stuff gown, and wore a neat cap—had her hair nicely arranged—and altogether appeared rather attractive, as she did the honours of the morning meal to her husband.

Upon this individual's countenance there was an expression of satisfaction which indicated that he was very far from repenting of his matrimonial bargain; and as he drank his chocolate and discussed his eggs and buttered toast, there seemed to be an air of domestic comfort about him, proving how readily he had cast off his bachelor habits and assumed those of a man who enjoys his own fireside.

When breakfast was over, and the servant-girl of the house had cleared away the things, Mr. Page drew his chair closer to his wife; and producing the pocket-book from the bosom of his dressing-gown, he said, with a cunning smile, "I suppose you know *this*, Julia?"

"Yes—it belonged to my father," she replied. "I have often seen him poring over the papers it contains—and he has read most of them to me a great many times."

"Then you know all about the matters they refer to?" remarked Page, interrogatively.

"Most of them, no doubt," returned the young woman. "But how came you by the pocket-book?"

"Your father gave it to me in his dying moments. He could barely gasp forth a few words," continued Page: "and those were scarcely intelligible. Let me see—I think I can recollect them exactly. He said, '*Take that pocket-book——tell Julia——Oh! I am going——My God! mercy—mercy——Hannah——Julia——Oh! pardon——mercy——pardon!*' And then he expired."

"Ah! he was touched with remorse on his death-bed," observed Julia, a slight humidity appearing upon her eye-lashes: but, hastily wiping it away, she added, "He was neither a good brother nor a good father; and I suppose that the way in which he had behaved to his sister, and the manner in which he brought me up, troubled him at last. I was a baby when my mother died; and my father neglected me altogether. When I was able to run alone, I was allowed to paddle about in the gutter from morning to night; and all the education I ever had was got at a charity school."

"But you speak very well, my dear, considering that you had so little instruction in your infancy," said Page, chucking her under the chin.

"Oh! I was fond of reading once—and then, my father was a very well-educated man, and it was impossible not to glean something from him: for of late years—since we settled in that court where he died—he always wanted me to be with him as much as possible. He disliked to be alone."

"You think that his conscience was troubled, Julia?" said Page, inquiringly.

"I am sure it was," responded the young woman, emphatically. "But it's not worth while for me to have any particular secrets from you *now*, since we are *one*, as the saying is: and therefore I'll tell you a great many curious things about my father—and also about the matters which some of the papers in that pocket-book refer to."

"Just what I want!" exclaimed Page, drawing his chair still closer to the one which his wife occupied. "It is snowing fast," he continued, glancing over his shoulder at the window; "and we will have a comfortable chat together for an hour or two. If it clears up presently, I will take you out shopping; and then we can have a nice little dinner at a tavern. But all this is on condition that you speak unreservedly, and tell me everything you know. Besides, it will be to your advantage as well as mine—for we may make money by these papers."

"So much the better," observed Julia. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that my father was skilled in chemistry above all things. He was acquainted with many wonderful secrets in that branch, and could compound poisons of the most deadly nature. Oh! my father was a terrible man, though I say it!" she added, with an unaffected shuddering.

"Indeed! But go on," exclaimed Page: "you are not answerable for any of his sins, you know."

"Thank God, I am not!" cried the young woman energetically. "My life has not been very regular, I confess:—but such things as he has done——no, no—never!"

"Don't vex and annoy yourself, Julia," said the commercial traveller, soothingly. "I am dying with impatience to hear what your father did. Pray go on."

"First let us speak of his chemical knowledge," continued Mrs. Page, her excitement almost instantaneously passing away—for she was naturally of a cold and imperturbable disposition. "No man was more expert in that branch than him. He used to compound drugs which produced abortion with ease and never failed in their effects; and all the old midwives in London patronised him."

"God bless my soul—how shocking!" exclaimed Page, involuntarily.

"It is as I tell you," said Julia. "One woman in particular—a Mrs. Lindley, who has a large esta-

blishment in Fore Street, Lambeth—was accustomed to purchase great quantities of him. He likewise compounded a poison one drop of which placed upon the tongue of an infant child, produced immediate death, leaving an appearance as if the poor little being had perished of ordinary convulsions. The midwives used to patronise this mixture also."

"There must be a vast amount of crime in London that I never dreamt of," observed Page, shaking his head solemnly.

"No doubt of it!" ejaculated Julia: then instantaneously resuming her wonted calmness of tone and manner, she said, "But the worst—if anything can be worse than what I have already revealed to you—is to come. My father invented a certain poison which he called the *Heir's Friend.* Do you understand?"

"Not exactly," returned Page. "How do you spell the first word?"

"Oh! I mean the *heir* that expects property, you know, and is waiting for some one to die off," continued Julia. "This poison was of such a nature that no medical man could tell that it had been taken. It baffled all the cleverest physicians in the world; and while they were attributing the victim's disease to a thousand other things, the real cause was nothing more or less than a few drops of this poison administered twice or three times a week. Being colourless and tasteless, it might be mixed with anything."

"These are indeed strange things that you are telling me," said Page, speaking in a low whisper, as if fearful of being overheard. "But what was the effect of the extraordinary poison you are speaking of?"

"Take, for instance, a person in robust health, and who has never known a day's illness," resumed Julia. "Well, you administer a few drops of this liquid to him—and a change comes over him in four-and-twenty hours. His constitution seems to give way suddenly: he grows pale—thin—weak—and sickly. His appetite fails him—he loses all energy, both mental and bodily — and literally perishes before your very eyes. It almost appears as if you can see him withering away; and in a few months he sinks into the grave."

"But this is dreadful!" exclaimed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Did I not tell you that my father was a terrible man?" said the young woman. "Well, you can now understand the reason why this poison is called the *Heir's Friend.* But my father sold very little of it: the traffic was too dangerous—and the price was large in proportion. Moreover he never would dispose of it in a direct way:—only through the agency of a person named Joseph Warren."

"Ah! a scoundrel who is better known as the Magsman?" cried Page, interrogatively.

"The same. Are you acquainted with him?" asked Julia.

"He was the villain who thrust me into the cellar of the den where the man you call Briggs appears to act as jailer," responded the commercial traveller. "But go on: I am deeply — though horribly—interested in all you are telling me. Was there no antidote to the wondrous poison you last spoke of?"

"Yes," answered Julia. "And the most extraordinary part of the whole affair is that even if the victim of that poison is at his last gasp, the antidote will be certain and sure to bring him back to life. It will even go farther—for in a few weeks it will not fail to restore him to all his former health, and gaiety, and appetite, and good looks. This is what my father used to call '*the triumph of the chemical art.*'"

"Triumph indeed!" ejaculated Page: "it is almost incredible!"

"But it is nevertheless true," returned his wife. "I have often and often seen him try the effects of both poison and antidote."

"Julia—you—you—make my hair stand on end!" gasped the commercial traveller, suddenly becoming ashy pale.

"You mistake me," she observed, smiling: "I meant upon rabbits, cats, and dogs—and not upon human beings. God forbid!"

"Ah! now I am relieved," said her husband, breathing freely once again. "The experiment must be an interesting one — *as an experiment,* mind; and I should like to see it tried."

"I can gratify you at any time," returned Julia; "for I have the receipts of both poison and antidote about me at this very moment."

"You have!" cried Page. "What the deuce made you get possession of them?"

"My father was looking over his pocket-book the other day," was the answer; "and he let a paper fall upon the floor. He did not notice the circumstance—and I afterwards picked it up. It contained the two receipts I speak of—together with another of quite a different character;—and, thinking it just as well that such a document should not be left in the old man's possession, I sewed it inside the lining of my stays. He did not miss it, to my knowledge, up to the hour of his death."

"And what is the other receipt which you allude to as being of a different nature from the poison and the antidote?" asked Page.

"It is more curious and ingenious than positively bad," replied Julia; "although it assists evil-designing persons to carry on a safe correspondence by means of letters. In fact, it consists of two distinct preparations. One is an invisible ink—the other is the chemical wash which must be rubbed over the sheet of paper to render the writing visible."

"Whew!" ejaculated Page, with a whistling sound. "Now I begin to see a clue to something which this pocket-book contains!"

"Very likely," observed Julia.

"But go on, my dear," added her husband. "We will go over the contents of the pocket-book together presently."

"I have little more to tell you," resumed Mrs. Page. "You see that the invisible ink and the chemical wash are very ingenious preparations. Suppose, for instance, that you wanted to correspond on secret matters with some accomplice at a distant place; and you were desirous of making sure that your letters should not be read. You would write with the invisible ink, and the sheet of paper would appear an entire blank. In this way it would go through the post, the address being alone written in proper ink. Well, your friend receives it—washes it over with the chemical preparation—and when it has been dried before the fire, all the writing appears as plain as possible. But this is not all. Suppose that, having read the

letter, your friend wishes to keep it by him for future reference. He can restore it to its blank state by dipping it in water—a simple process which causes all the writing to disappear once more. The chemical preparation will however bring forth that writing again, when required; and this may be done for three or four times without destroying the document."

"Wonderful!—wonderful!" ejaculated the commercial traveller. "And you say that you are in possession of these receipts as well as those for the terrible poison and its counteractive?"

"Yes: you may have them whenever you will," answered Julia.

"We will make use of the chemical preparation to restore the writing this very day, my dear," said Page. "And now tell me—was your father intimately leagued with that Magsman?"

"Much more than I liked," responded the young woman. "Don't you remember that when we were examining the cellar together the night before last, I told you that I hated the man Briggs and all his crew? I don't pretend to be very particular in some matters: but I detest the miscreants that deal in murder by poison or violent means, as I am sure those fellows have long done."

"Well—well," interrupted Page; "you are now removed from their society, at all events. Let us next turn our attention to the papers contained in this pocket-book. Of course the Hannah Lightfoot whose hair is enclosed in one of these papers, and whose Christian name or initials are appended to the letters, was your father's sister—consequently your aunt?"

"She was," answered Julia. "But I never saw her: she died of a broken-heart when I was a mere child."

"Now, do you think she was really married to the present King—or not?" inquired Page.

"It is impossible to say. I used to ask my father sometimes—but he always evaded the question. For my part, I should imagine that she was: for I believe that her principles were most excellent and her virtue beyond all question. Besides," added Julia, "the contents of that pocket-book appear to prove that she was a wife, and not a mistress."

"Such is my opinion," observed Page. "But how was it that your father, who was evidently such a griping and avaricious man, did not think of making money by these papers?" demanded the commercial traveller.

"I know that he often thought of doing so," was the reply: "but I have heard him say, when he was in conversation with the Magsman upon the subject, that the letters proved nothing. They were restored to my aunt, it appears, when all connexion was broken off between her and the present King—then Prince of Wales. But one-half of a certain document in my aunt's possession had unfortunately been lost by her—and that was the only paper which really might have been made good use of, had it fallen in its entire state into my father's hands."

"Then your father never had that document in an entire state?" said Page.

"Never," was the reply. "But I will tell you how that was—for I have often heard the old man speaking about it. It appears that when my aunt's connexion with George III—then Prince of Wales—ceased, she retired into the strictest seclusion, living upon a small pension allowed her through the agency of a certain Lady Stamford. My father used to visit her occasionally, and urged her to assist in extorting money from her former lover, or husband—whichever he might have been—and who had now become King. But my aunt always refused with indignation to lend herself to such a proceeding. This caused serious quarrels between them—and at last my aunt removed to some place where he could not find her out. A long, long time elapsed; and it was just before my aunt's death occurred about sixteen years ago, that she again changed her residence, having been traced out by my father. She now took a lodging at Aylesbury, in the house of a young and new-married couple named Warren."

"What! the Magsman?" ejaculated Page.

"You shall hear. These Warrens were poor: but my aunt believed them to be honest. Mrs. Warren, who was then about four-and-twenty, was a woman of remarkable beauty and superior education: but having disgraced herself, she was discarded by her family and was glad to marry a junior clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury."

"Martin's bank!" exclaimed Page. "Why, all these matters begin to connect themselves together like so many different links of the same chain. But go on."

"Well—one day, when my aunt Hannah Lightfoot was very ill, she had been examining the contents of a pocket-book with great attention, and had wept over them,—Mrs. Warren being present at the time. It appears that a piece of paper dropped upon the floor, as my aunt was replacing the documents; and she did not notice it. Mrs. Warren picked it up stealthily—secreted it—and afterwards showed it to her husband. It was a portion of a certificate or memorandum, and bore the signature of the present King when he was Prince of Wales. The Warrens kept it with the determination of securing the other half and obtaining money by it from the Government. But at this crisis, my father again discovered his sister's abode, and made his appearance at the house. His presence caused her death; and he took possession of all her little property, the pocket-book included."

"Perhaps he tried the effect of some of his poisons on the unfortunate lady?" observed the commercial traveller, looking at his wife significantly—as if he had made a very shrewd guess.

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed Julia. "But I must confess that I have often had my suspicions on that point," she observed, shaking her head ominously.

"Well, go on. I suppose," continued Page, "that your father and the Warrens put their wits together to see what they could do with the papers."

"No such thing!" returned Julia "The Warrens kept their own secret relative to the half of the document which they had in their possession; and my father walked off with the pocket-book, leaving those people to conduct his sister's funeral. Remember, all this occurred sixteen years ago—just about the time that my mother died. Well, time slipped away—and five or six years back my father and I went to live in that court where *he* died the other day and you found *me*. Three years ago he fell in with the Magsman, who about that period took the house next door for his own purposes. My

father's name being Lightfoot instantly struck the Magsman with a certain suspicion; and on conversing together they found that they had met before, in past times. For this Magsman was none other than Joseph Warren, formerly a clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury. Then Warren told my father about the half of the document which his wife had discovered; and my father was most anxious to learn what had become of it. Warren informed him that soon after the funeral of Hannah Lightfoot had taken place, he wrote to the Home Secretary, enclosing a copy of the fragment of the paper and offering to sell it for a handsome sum of money. The negotiation was long and tedious: but at the end of several months a bargain was struck; and Mrs. Warren was sent by her husband to London to receive the money and give up the document. It however appears that she never returned to Aylesbury; and from that moment Warren lost all clue to her. He repaired to London in search of her: all was in vain—and what seemed more extraordinary was the fact that she had not been to the Home Office at all. Her husband therefore concluded that she had met her death either by accident or foul means; and we may suppose that he was not a little vexed at this failure of his grand hopes of enriching himself. He remained in London, and soon took to those ways which we now find him pursuing."

"And how came you to learn all these latter particulars?" asked Page, greatly interested in the singular narrative.

"Because the first interview between my father and the Magsman took place in my presence," was the answer; "and, although I was only sixteen at the time, I was rather sharp for my age and listened to everything I heard."

"We must suppose, from all the facts that are known to us," continued Page, "that the other and most important half of the certificate is irretrievably lost—perhaps destroyed altogether."

"Such was my father's impression after he had heard all that the Magsman told him when they met in the way I have just related: but soon afterwards," continued Julia, "something happened to make him alter his opinion on that head: and there is every reason to believe that the other half of the paper is still in existence somewhere."

"Indeed!" cried Page. "But what is this new incident to which you refer?"

"I will tell you," said the young woman. "Many years ago, it seems, the Magsman was acquainted with Jack Rann, the celebrated highwayman, who at that time had a beautiful mistress called Letitia Fluke. This female has since married a rich baronet; and her present name is Lade. About six months ago the Magsman met Lady Letitia, and instantly recognised her, although she was dressed in male attire: for it appears that she is a dashing horsewoman and frequently goes about dressed up as a man. I suppose that she and the Magsman must have conversed together in a confidential way: for in the course of their interview something that he dropped induced the lady to ask farther questions—and this led to other proceedings. For, a few days afterwards, she paid my father a visit, accompanied by a sporting gentleman whom she called Tim Meagles; and shortly afterwards the Magsman arrived. I was turned out of the room: but I listened at the door—and I heard this Meagles make certain proposals to my father for the surrender of the remaining half of the document which he held in his possession."

"Stop!" ejaculated Page, a thought striking him: and, turning over the contents of the pocket-book, he produced the short note written in a neat female hand, and the contents of which were as follow:—

"*July* 7, 1794.

"The next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening.

"L. L."

"This is no doubt from the lady you speak of!" exclaimed Page, after hastily glancing over the note. "L. L. stands for *Letitia Lade*—and T. M. means *Timothy Meagles*. It is as clear as daylight!"

"I never saw that letter before," observed Julia. "To whom is it addressed?"

"To nobody. It doubtless was enclosed in an envelope, which was thrown away."

"Well, I should think it was written to the Magsman," observed Julia, after a few moments' reflection: "because she would scarcely tell my father to use the chemical preparation for the letter that was to follow—as he was sure to do so on receiving a blank sheet of paper. Besides, I do not remember that either she or Meagles ever paid my father a second visit—and I know that on the occasion when they were all closetted together, as I was just now telling you, the interview concluded in a manner which put an end to all negotiation."

"How was that?" inquired Page.

"Why, when Meagles made his proposals for the half of the certificate," returned Julia, "my father instantly exclaimed, '*Then the other half is in existence; and you know where it is! Perhaps it is even in your possession?*'—Meagles vowed complete ignorance, and observed that he was a mere agent in the business. Thereupon my father declared that he would only treat with a principal: and he accused the Magsman of knowing more about the affair than he chose to confess. Warren protested against this charge: a quarrel ensued—and Meagles took his departure with Lady Letitia, no arrangement having been made."

"I wonder that the Magsman never tried to rob your father of his papers," observed Page.

"God bless you! he did within a week after this business," exclaimed Julia: "but the old man concealed the pocket-book so effectually, that the search was instituted in vain. The Magsman, Briggs, and a fellow called the Big Beggarman——"

"I know him—the scoundrel!" cried Page. "Upon my word, I am quite at home with all these characters. But go on."

"Well—the three villains got into the house at night—bound my father neck and heels with strong cords—and held a pistol to my head while they ransacked the place: but not a trace of the pocket-book could they find. I suppose the old man used to bury it in the cellar. However, they went away sadly disappointed; and the next morning the Magsman came and made his peace with my father; for I imagine that they were too useful to each other and too deeply mixed up in certain transactions to remain bad friends."

"No doubt of it!" observed Page. "And now that I bethink me again," he continued, producing a paper from the pocket-book, "here is a blank

sheet folded in the form of a letter. Perhaps a little application of the chemical wash will elicit more secrets—eh, Julia?"

"Let us try presently. Has it any address?" she inquired.

"None. It was doubtless enclosed in an envelope like the little note; and it may perhaps be the very letter which was to follow that note. But if these missives were really sent to the Magsman, how came they in your father's possession?"

"I know that Warren was constantly pestering the old man about the half of the document," said Julia; "and perhaps he gave him these letters to prove that a negotiation might still be effected with Meagles and Lady Letitia. At all events, the date on that little note—July 7th, 1794—proves that it must have been sent within a very few days after those persons called: because I remember well that their visit took place in the early part of that month last year."

"We will lose no time now in procuring the drugs to make the chemical preparation for this blank letter," said Page; "and we will talk more about the contents of the pocket-book another time. Come," he exclaimed, starting from his seat and approaching the window: "the snow has left off—the weather is clearing up—and we will go out at once. But you must unsew your stays and give me the receipts."

"That is soon done," observed Julia; and she entered the bed-room for the purpose, while Page secured the pocket-book in a cupboard, of which he was careful to take the key.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE AMAZON AND TIM MEAGLES.

While the preceding conversation was in progress at the lodgings of Mr. Page and his bride in Southwark, an interview of a scarcely less interesting nature took place between Lady Letitia Lade and Tim Meagles.

This gentleman, as we have already intimated, occupied apartments in Jermyn Street. He had a handsome parlour on the first floor,—a bed-chamber communicating therewith—and a snug little dressing-room adjoining. An elderly widow kept the house, in which there were two or three other lodgers of the male sex: but Mr. Meagles was the one to whom she devoted her best attention—Mr. Meagles was the pink of perfection in her eyes—and if ever she wished to convey her ideas of a true gentleman, it was Mr. Meagles whom she held up as an example.

The fact was that Tim paid her liberally—gave little trouble—and was of such a happy and contented disposition that, to use Mrs. Piggleberry's own words, "he never was put out by nothink." He appeared quite unconscious of the trifling fact that he found tea, sugar, butter, bread, and even meat, for his landlady and her servant as well as for himself and his page: if he had a ham for breakfast, he never was astonished to learn on the fourth or fifth morning that it was all gone!—and if he had a large joint served up for his dinner one day, he did not exhibit the least amazement the next when Mrs. Piggleberry unblushingly told him to his face that there was nothing in the house and requested him to give his orders! As regularly as possible every six months the worthy woman represented to him that he must have another set of a dozen shirts; and Meagles invariably tossed down the requisite amount, without a murmur. All these little circumstances rendered him a special favourite with Mrs. Piggleberry—as indeed he ought to have been; and the consequence was that she never felt wearied of chaunting to all her friends and acquaintances the praises of Mr. Meagles.

But, then, the place suited Tim uncommonly well;—and, although he knew that he was robbed through thick and thin, even to the recognition of his very shirts upon the person of his landlady's brother, who was in poor circumstances and kept a small shop in the neighbourhood,—yet he consoled himself with the reflection that he should be plundered to an equal extent in any other lodgings, without perhaps enjoying the same freedom from impertinent curiosity and prying observation as he experienced beneath the roof of Mrs. Piggleberry. For this good creature never appeared to see nor hear anything that she ought not. Though Lady Letitia was a frequent visitor at Tim's apartments, the discreet old woman pretended to be quite ignorant of her sex, and invariably announced her as *Mr. Lade;* and if he invited to his lodgings any ladies who were *not* dressed in male attire, Mrs. Piggleberry would never suffer it to appear that she suspected their equivocal character, but spoke of them as "Mr. Meagles' charming cousins." Moreover, when Tim, had a party of gentlemen to sup with him, and when he said next morning, "My dear Mrs. Piggleberry, I am afraid we kicked up a frightful row all last night,"—she would assume an air of amazement, and exclaim, "Why! dearey me, sir, I was only observing a minit ago to the servint-gal that the house never was so quiet!" And yet perhaps the uproarious songs, peals of laughter, and insane shoutings had brought the watch thundering at the door half-a-dozen times between midnight and sun-rise.

We have already hinted that Meagles had a page, or foot-boy: and we must pause for a few moments to state that this precocious youth of fourteen was one of the sharpest, cleverest, and most knowing young rascals in the metropolis. He was short—slim—genteel—and good-looking: his livery became him admirably;—and, whatever his real name might have been, he was invariably called by the pseudonym of *Wasp*. Active, faithful, mischievous, and discreet, he was invaluable to Meagles—a plague to the servant-girl—a little devil in the eyes of Mrs. Piggleberry, who however declared that he was the quietest and nicest boy she ever met with—and a complete imp in the estimation of the second and third floor lodgers, on whom he was always playing off his tricks.

In addition to this human appendage, Meagles had a groom to take care of his two horses, which he kept at stables hard by; but as the man did not live in Mrs. Piggleberry's house, we can scarcely include him in the establishment which we have been describing.

To resume the thread of our narrative,—it was, as we have already observed, on the same morning when Mr. Page and his wife were seated in confabulation in the Borough, that Lady Letitia Lade partook of breakfast with her friend Meagles. It was about ten o'clock when the Amazon arrived; and her cheeks

were glowing with the flush of health, while her hair glittered like hyperions with the morning dew—for she had already taken a gallop three or four times round Hyde Park to give her an appetite.

And an appetite, indeed, she brought with her: inasmuch as vigorous were the assaults she made upon the cold fowl and ham and the pigeon pie, which viands she washed down with bottled ale, her taste being decidedly repugnant to Bohea and Mocha.

When the repast was over, Meagles said, "Now, Letitia, let us have a little conversation upon business. You are such a harum-scarum creature, that it is difficult to induce you to settle down your thoughts to anything serious."

"That's not true, Tim," she exclaimed. "Did I not play my part well the other day, and afford you ample time to open the Prince's desk?—and did you not obtain all the papers you required?"

"Yes—I must admit that you did keep George pretty well engaged in the bath-room," said Tim. "But mind you don't repeat the pastime till I want your services again for any similar purpose."

"You are jealous—are you, Tim?" cried the lady, laughing heartily. "Why, you unreasonable dog! You first tell me what I am to do—you make me promise to talk about the bath-room, in order to lead the Prince to invite me to view it—you know what must inevitably follow—and then you are more than half inclined to upbraid me. Now, this is too bad!"

"Well—we won't say any more about it, Letitia," returned Meagles. "Let us talk of business. And, in the first place, I must tell you that I last night had another proof of the Prince's utter selfishness and thorough want of heart."

"In what way?" demanded Letitia.

"You know it was George's fault that I did not go off at once yesterday and pay the money to that poor devil Foster," resumed Meagles. "The consequence was that I arrived *too late*—the poor man had blown his brains out!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Amazon, with unaffected horror.

"Yes—and his unfortunate wife fell down dead upon the disfigured corpse of her suicide husband," continued Meagles.

"This is too shocking!" cried Lady Letitia. "I would not for all the world become the cause of such a catastrophe," she added, with the emphasis of sincerity.

"Nor I either. And now will you believe me when I assure you that the Prince received the dreadful intelligence with the most heartless indifference;—or I should rather say that any feelings which he displayed in the matter were those of an intense selfishness. His first impulse was to express anxiety lest the circumstances of the suicide should transpire and expose his name to scandal and obloquy. But I had already taken measures to save him from that ignominy; and when he was thus reassured, he indulged in a fiendish hope that I had not parted with the money which the Marquis of Saint Croix advanced, and which had been destined to pay the amount due to the ruined Foster!"

"I am not surprised—but I am horror-stricken by the Prince's conduct," said Lady Letitia. "What followed?"

"I told the Prince that I had paid the debt for which Hodson and Morley so cruelly pressed the deceased: and so indeed I had. He was much vexed at having thus lost the chance of using the money for his own purposes: but he speedily consoled himself with the prospect of passing a jovial night—for he had company in the banquetting-room. I refused to join them—and came home."

"And this is the heartless man who is one day to become the *Father of his People!*" exclaimed the Amazon, in a tone of deep disgust. "You do well, Tim, to adopt all kinds of precautions," she added, at the expiration of a minute, "to guard against being ill-treated by him eventually."

"Yes—he looks upon me as a mere tool: but he shall find that he cannot play tricks with *me*," returned Tim, his usually frank and open countenance becoming sombre and menacing. "I have got him in my power—and I shall not easily resign my hold upon him. In the caprice of a moment he is capable of discarding me——"

"Or rather of attempting to do so," interrupted Letitia.

"Yes—that is what I meant," said Meagles: "because the instant that he seeks to make me the victim of his heartlessness, I proclaim my independence—I threaten him with exposure—I wring from him all that I choose to demand! Do you think that a peerage and a good pension for life would be too much for my services, Letitia?" demanded Tim, his countenance expanding into a smile of mingled triumph and satisfaction.

"Not a whit!" was the energetic reply. "And remember," added the huntress, fixing her wanton looks upon him, "when Sir John Lade dies——"

"I know what you mean, my beauty," exclaimed Meagles: "there is no necessity to remind me of our bargain. It shall be a marriage-partnership—and instead of a baronet's wife, you shall become a peeress. Yes—this I can safely promise," he continued, in a musing tone: "for, possessed as I am of those documents, our royal friend would not dare to refuse me even the title of a Duke in order to purchase their restoration."

"You have examined them attentively?" asked Lady Letitia.

"Since they came into my hands the other day I have read and re-read them a dozen times," responded Meagles. "They fully prove all that we had long suspected in reference to the nature of his connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert: and, as luck would have it, the packet contained a certain little fragment which I never anticipated to find amongst those papers."

"What! you do not mean the half of the certificate relating to the Prince's father and Hannah Lightfoot?" exclaimed the Amazon.

"I mean nothing else, I can assure you, my beauty," answered Tim, chuckling with satisfaction. "And what is more, we will renew our negotiations with that fellow Warren—the Magsman, as he is called—respecting the purchase of the other half, which remains in the possession of that crabbed old rascal, Lightfoot: but this time, Letitia, these negotiations shall be on *our own account*, and not for the behoof of the Prince."

"Admirable!" cried the gay lady, her splendid countenance glowing with delight. "It is upwards of six months, I should imagine, since we first took steps in that matter; and, having failed, the thing has been neglected. But I never learnt how the half of the document originally fell into the hands of the Prince," she continued, in an inquiring tone: "and you have often promised to give me an explanation."

"Well—I will do so now, my charmer," returned Meagles; "and the narrative will afford you a little farther insight with respect to the character of our friend George. It will moreover prove that we are fully justified in obtaining possession of papers for the purpose of overawing *him*, inasmuch as he has not hesitated to adopt the same course with a view to coerce his own father."

"What! to menace and threaten the King?" exclaimed Letitia, in astonishment.

"Nothing more nor less," responded Meagles, coolly. "Listen. It was a little more than fifteen years ago, that the Prince—then only eighteen—was one evening walking by himself down Whitehall, when he espied by the lamp-light a beautiful young woman who appeared to be surveying the buildings in that neighbourhood as if she were looking for some particular house or Government Office. He accosted her, and soon got into conversation with the charming stranger. She told him that she had come from Aylesbury on important business, and was anxious to obtain an interview with the Home Secretary as soon as possible. The Prince assured her that it was too late to procure an audience of that functionary; and she finally agreed to accompany him whithersoever he chose to take her. I need scarcely tell you that they passed the night together; and so pleased was the stripling George with his new acquaintance that he was by no means desirous for the amour to terminate there. He accordingly made her certain proposals—offering to maintain her as his mistress, and revealing who he was. The young woman was overjoyed at having captivated the Prince; and, in the fullness of her delight, she told him the object of her journey to London. In fact, this was none other than Mrs. Warren, the wife of the fellow who is now known as the Magsman."

"I remember well that when I first knew Warren fourteen or fifteen years since," said Lady Letitia, "he told me and Rann how he had come up to London to look for his wife; and he also acquainted us at the same time with the object of her journey. Therefore, when I met Warren again six or seven months ago, one of the first questions I put to him was whether he had ever succeeded in finding his wife; and, after replying in the negative, he observed it was vexatious that the one half of the certificate had disappeared with her, because accident had thrown him in the way of the late Hannah Lightfoot's brother, in whose possession the other half existed. I subsequently mentioned this fact to you, Tim—if you remember: and then you told me for the first time that you had seen in the hands of the Prince the fragment which Mrs. Warren had originally brought with her to London."

"I recollect," said Meagles: "and it was fortunate that the Magsman had told you where he might be found in case his services were ever needed."

"Not particularly fortunate either," returned the Amazon: "for when you and I visited old Lightfoot, according to a previous arrangement with Warren, the crabbed old fellow would not so much as show us his half of the document—much less part with it on any consideration."

"He fancied he should get more by treating with the principal," observed Meagles. "But now that we have resolved to renew the negotiations, and on our own account too, we will be more liberal in our offers than the means of the Prince permitted us to be six or seven months ago. You can obtain three or four thousand pounds from Sir John—can't you, my beauty?"

"Leave me to manage *that*, Tim," replied the Amazon. "And now finish your story about Mrs. Warren."

"Oh! I had completely lost sight of that," exclaimed Meagles. "Well—I was saying that the Prince made proposals to Mrs. Warren, and that she acquainted him with the object of her journey to London. He induced her to give up the fragment of the certificate to him; and he provided splendidly for her: but I never could learn from him what became of her, nor how long their connexion lasted. All I know is that she certainly did not go back to her husband; and perhaps she was very glad to be separated from a fellow who, to judge by his present appearance and manners, was likely enough to have been coarse and brutal fifteen or sixteen years ago."

"He was never a polished diamond," remarked Lady Letitia. "But poor Rann made him useful during the few months that their acquaintance lasted; and afterwards I totally lost sight of the fellow until I met him last July."

"To return to what we were talking about," resumed Meagles, "I must inform you that the Prince had the most selfish motives in getting possession of the fragment of the certificate signed by his father, instead of letting the Home Secretary buy it up. For George the Third had already experienced good reason to complain of his eldest son's extravagances; and the Prince thought that it would be as well to hold in his hand the means of coercing his father at pleasure. Accordingly, more than once has he threatened His Majesty to enclose the paper to the Queen, unless his demands were satisfied; and as the King stands in awful dread of his royal wife, the prudish and snuff-taking Charlotte, this menace has usually had the desired effect. But the next time that the Prince contemplates using the mysterious fragment, he will search for it in vain," added Meagles, with a laugh of satisfaction. "In fact, I have succeeded in getting the King—the Prince—and Mrs. Fitzherbert completely into my power."

"Mrs. Fitzherbert!" exclaimed Lady Letitia. "I do not see how she is precisely in your power, Tim. It is true that you have ascertained the real nature of her connexion with the Prince: but perhaps she would thank you for proclaiming it, rather than feel herself aggrieved."

"Ah! this is another secret of mine, you harum-scarum good-for-nothing," said Meagles, with a sly look. "But I do not intend to make any mystery of it towards you, Letitia," he added almost immediately,—"now that we have determined to pull together in the same boat. The fact is that the influx of these foreign refugees has proved of some service; for on the one hand it has thrown upon our shores a Marquis of Saint Croix to lend a good round sum to the Prince of Wales—and on the other hand it has sent amongst us a Marquis of Bellois to give certain curious information to Mr. Timothy Meagles."

"What do you mean?" inquired the Amazon, animated with the most lively curiosity.

"I mean that eight years ago Mrs. Fitzherbert visited France," replied Meagles; "and that at Plombiers she became acquainted with a nobleman of handsome appearance and elegant manners: I mean also that she fell deeply in love with him, and that she accompanied him to Paris, where in

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due time a child was born—the issue of this amour. The nobleman to whom I allude was the Marquis of Bellois!"

"And is the Prince ignorant of this chapter in the life of Mrs. Fitzherbert?" asked Lady Letitia.

"He has not the remotest suspicion of it," returned Meagles. "It was in consequence of a quarrel which took place between them at the time, that Mrs. Fitzherbert withdrew to France; and her absence lasted altogether eighteen months. During that interval her amour with the Marquis de Bellois took place: but, fortunately for her, the offspring of the connexion was born dead. Scarcely had she recovered from her confinement, when letters from the Prince reached her imploring that she would return to England. She assented—and the French nobleman was abandoned by his beautiful mistress. Nearly seven years have elapsed since Mrs. Fitzherbert thus came back to the Prince; and now the Marquis was himself arrived in London. He is a gambler—a debauchee—an unprincipled profligate; and he is in possession of letters proving his connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert. I have seen and read them: and the Marquis intends to convert them into a means of replenishing a purse which extravagance has emptied. Those papers, Letitia," added Meagles emphatically, "you and I must purchase. With a thousand pounds I will undertake to secure them."

"And I will guarantee to furnish you with the requisite amount in the course of the week, Tim," answered the Amazon. "At the same time I do not foresee any particular advantage in possessing weapons which, in all probability, you will never have to use against Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"Let us provide our bow with as many strings as possible, my dear Letitia," observed Meagles. "Who can tell what may happen? The King may die soon—and our friend George, when once seated on the throne, may choose to cast the Royal

Marriage Act to the winds and proclaim Mrs. Fitzherbert his wife and his Queen. In such a case, would it be of no avail to us that the honour of the lady exists in our keeping? But, under any circumstances, when we have obtained as much as we can get from the Prince, we shall then demand *more* through the influence and agency of Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"You are right, Tim," said the Amazon: "we will secure the possession of the Marquis of Bellois' papers. And now, when are we to renew our negotiations with Joseph Warren, the redoubtable Magsman?"

"You and I will pay that worthy a visit this very evening, my beauty," answered Meagles. "Only fancy what a glorious thing it would be for us if we should succeed in obtaining the other half of the certificate, and if, when put together, the entire document proved that the present King was really married to Hannah Lightfoot! Why—not only would the honour of the Sovereign be completely in our hands—but likewise the validity of his alliance with the Queen and the legitimacy of all his children."

"To be sure!" ejaculated the huntress. "But I am afraid, from certain expressions—mangled and fragmentary though they be—in the moiety of the document which we now possess, that no real marriage ever took place."

"The whole tenour of that moiety, so far as we can understand it," said Meagles, "admits of two interpretations,—one for, and the other against a belief in such a marriage. It is impossible to decide between them until we can peruse the document as a whole; and this evening we will endeavour to lay a train for the purchase of the fragment in old Lightfoot's possession," added Tim: for the old man's death was unknown to him and the Amazon.

"I dare say we shall succeed," observed the latter, rising from her seat. "We shall work with more energy now that it is for ourselves, than we did when the Prince commissioned you to negotiate privately in his behalf. But it is now mid-day, Tim—and the weather is clearing up. I must hasten home—change my Amazonian garb for a silk gown, gipsy-bonnet, and warm furs—and appear in a dress which, as the common phrase goes, is *suitable to my sex*," she added, laughing.

"And pray whom are you bent upon captivating to-day?" demanded Tim, bestowing upon the splendid creature a caress which she received in a manner indicating that, however profligate she might be, and however lavish of her favours she notoriously was, she nevertheless entertained something like a sincere affection for Meagles.

"So far from having any such idea as you impute to me, Tim," she said, in answer to the question which he had jocularly put to her, "I mean to play the amiable towards old Sir John, and take him out for an airing in the carriage. He will be so delighted that nothing I may ask will be refused; and I shall pave the way to obtain the few thousands that you and I are likely to require for our purposes in the course of the week. Adieu for the present, my dear Tim: I shall call for you at about eight this evening—and we will then proceed together to the classic region of Horslydown."

"Adieu, my charmer," returned Meagles, pressing his lips to her rich red mouth; and the Amazon took her departure from the lodgings of her paramour.

We cannot close this chapter without directing the attention of the reader to the fact that Mr. Meagles had maintained towards Lady Letitia Lade the same secrecy and silence relative to the orphan Rose which he had observed on the preceding evening with the Prince of Wales.

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. PAGE AND HIS WIFE.

We now go back to Mr. Page and his wife, whom we shall find proceeding arm-in-arm from the Borough towards old London Bridge.

The commercial traveller, flattering himself that he was a man worth six thousand pounds in ready money and possessing papers calculated to produce as much again, walked with his head erect and an air of such assurance that one would have thought the entire metropolis belonged to him. In this respect he was well matched by Julia, who, fancying that her gaudy bonnet and her flaunting shawl were sufficient to render her "quite the lady," marched along with an assumption of vulgar pride which made her seem as if she fancied the street was not half wide enough for her. The little boys stared at the singular-looking couple—sober-minded people experienced a sentiment of pity for their vanity—and when the poor shivering beggars touched their hats or curtsied, as the case of sex might be, Page held his head up higher still; for it struck him that he was all of a sudden very much respected.

In this manner they crossed the bridge, and proceeded straight to Wood Street, where they entered the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley.

The senior partner happened to be there at the moment, superintending the unpacking of some bales of goods which had just arrived; and, on hearing the door open, he raised his eyes and beheld the commercial traveller with a bold-looking woman hanging to his arm.

Mr. Hodson was astonished; and, putting on his spectacles, he indulged in another long stare at the newly-married couple. Yes—it was really Page,—Page with his hat cocked jauntily on one side of his head, and with such a smirking familiarity expressed alike in his countenance and manner, that the sedate merchant knew not whether to consider him drunk or demented. But how different from the Mr. Page who used to take off his beaver the instant he crossed the threshold, and who was wont to glide noiselessly through the warehouse direct into the private office as if he were treading upon eggs! And then that woman, too—with the flaunting dress of a vulgar upstart and the bold looks of a courtezan! What could it all mean? Mr. Hodson knew not: he was bewildered—and, turning towards the porter who stood gazing open-mouthed upon the pair, he said in a hollow tone, "Ask Mr. Morley to step this way."

"I hope I don't intrude, Hodson," exclaimed Page, caressing his chin and speaking in a sort of blandly patronising tone: "but I thought that as I was in the neighbourhood I might just as well drop in to ask you how you got on, and likewise to tell you, my boy, to look out for another country-traveller—as I've cut the thing dead. D'ye hear, Hodson?"

The merchant had indeed heard: but he could scarcely believe his ears. Was it possible that Page had called him "Hodson,"—plain and simple "Hodson,"—aye, and *twice* too? He was aghast with surprise; and he began to wonder whether the world had suddenly turned upside down, when Mr. Morley came hurrying forth from the counting-house.

"Ah! Page—is that you?" cried the junior partner, who was a short, thin, active little man. 'Well—I'm glad to see you're alive and hearty, after all you've undergone. But who is this young woman?" he demanded, his eyes settling suspiciously upon Julia.

"This *lady*, sir," said Mr. Page pompously, "is my wife. And I am proud and happy to inform you, friend Morley," he added, unbending a little, "that she has brought me a fortune of twenty thousand pounds."

As he uttered these words, he pressed Julia's arm slightly with his own, in order to intimate that she need not contradict the little lie which his vanity prompted him to tell respecting the amount of her dowry.

"Twenty thousand pounds!" ejaculated Hodson and Morley as if it were in the same breath.

"Not a farthing more or less, I can assure you," said Mr. Page, tapping his cane impressively upon the floor.

"Well—I am delighted to hear it, my dear friend," exclaimed Hodson, who worshipped Mammon far more devoutly than he did either Royalty or Aristocracy.

"And so am I, Page—quite rejoiced," added Morley, whose deity was also Money.

And then the two partners shook their late traveller warmly by both hands; and, having done this, they offered their congratulations to Mrs. Page, hoping that they should have the pleasure of introducing her very shortly to Mrs. Hodson and Mrs. Morley. It was indeed wonderful to behold the effect which the magic words "twenty thousand pounds" had produced upon the stiff and starch senior partner, and the active, bustling, business-like junior. Julia no longer appeared in their eyes to have the boldness of a courtezan: in their minds her demeanour had suddenly become associated with debentures—her character with cash—her features with funds—and her entire countenance with consols;—and they were seized with anxiety that their wives should make her acquaintance. Even when she tossed her head, gave herself airs, and said something about calling another day, they overwhelmed her with politeness; and there was a great deal more shaking of hands ere Mr. Page and his bride took their leave on this occasion.

Having thus shown themselves off in Wood Street, they repaired to St. Paul's Churchyard, where Mr. Page procured some drug at a chemist's shop. Thence they proceeded into Fleet Street, where he bought another drug at another shop; and in the Strand he made his third purchase.

"You see, Julia," he observed, as they walked along, "that I exercise a sound discretion in thus obtaining the things at different places. There are three ingredients in the chemical preparation for the wash to put upon the blank sheet of paper; and if I purchased them all at the same shop, the chemist would begin to mix and compound the moment our backs were turned, in order to discover for what purpose we wanted such scarce and expensive articles."

"God bless your soul, Henry," exclaimed his wife, "you are only acting with a prudence that is quite natural. My father always did the same: and therefore I don't see anything to be so particularly proud of."

"Well—well, my dear," returned Page: "at all events you perceive that I adopt the same precautions as your deceased father—and he was a very shrewd man."

"Just so," said Julia; and, to use a parliamentary phrase, the subject then dropped.

Having completed their chemical purchases, and likewise a little "shopping" for the behoof of Mrs. Page, the worthy couple entered a tavern, where a private room and a good dinner were immediately ordered. They did ample justice to the repast; and when it was over, a hackney-coach conveyed them back to the Borough of Southwark.

It was dusk when they reached their lodgings; and as soon as the candles were lighted and the curtains were drawn in the parlour, they seated themselves by the cheerful fire and began to compound the chemical wash in accordance with the receipt. This employment occupied nearly half-an-hour; and when the preparation was made, the pocket-book was once more produced. The blank sheet of paper already so often referred to, was then spread out upon the table; and by the assistance of a large camel's-hair brush, the wash was carefully laid on. With feelings of acute suspense did Page now hold the paper in front of the fire; and as the moisture slowly exhaled, he observed with infinite satisfaction that lines of writing gradually appeared upon the surface of the sheet.

"By Jove! it is just as you described!" he exclaimed, glancing triumphantly towards Julia. "The receipt fulfils all you have told me. Look—the contents of the letter are standing out as it were from amidst the misty vapour. And 'tis just the same neat female handwriting as that in the little note signed L. L. Yes—this is the letter which was to follow by the next post—there's not a doubt of it! We're on the point of penetrating into some strange mysteries, I'll warrant! Holloa! I do believe that the document contains a copy of the other half of the certificate."

"To be sure it does!" said Julia, bending down so as to obtain a nearer view of the letter as her husband held it before the fire. "There's a short passage running down the right hand of the page—and I can read the name of *Hannah Lightfoot* in it! Come—that will do—it is dry enough now. Let us examine it at once."

"We will," returned Page: "I am even more impatient than you are. Because, if the certificate should prove that your aunt was really married to the present King, our fortunes are made. And even if it should be otherwise, we are in possession of papers which the Government will cheerfully buy up."

"While you are talking thus, the letter will singe," said Julia, somewhat impatiently. "Let us see what it contains, and debate upon it afterwards."

"We will, my dear," answered Mr. Page: then placing the document before him upon the table, he read it aloud in slow and measured terms:—

"*July* 7, 1794. *Evening*, 6 *o'clock*.

"My little note of this morning has prepared you for the receipt of this; and you must now judge whether it is worth while for you to compel old Lightfoot by foul

means to surrender up his half of the paper, since he refuses to do so by fair means. T. M. has procured a copy of the half which is in the possession of the individual who employs *him* in the business: and thus it runs:—

may concern, and know ye, all
the undersigned, George Prince of
cknowledge that I do now take
wife in the sight of an all-seeing
ewise undersigned Miss Hannah
nderly and devotedly love with
ul, and who fully as sincerely,
me in return, with all her true
w likewise, all persons whom
nly and sacredly bind and pledge
ght of an all-seeing heaven, that
shall so dispose the heart of my
as to grant his royal and paternal
ssion to the proper celebration
signed Miss Hannah Lightfoot,—
at refusal which so very sorely
sion to the royal throne of
se (which God long prevent!)
lay, make her my wife and Queen:
dy consider ourselves to be
tly and severally set our hands
sence of a competent witness,
ousand seven hundred and fifty-seven.

GEORGE P.
HANNAH LIGHTFOOT.

Such is the copy of the fragment in the possession of the person who employs T. M. in the matter: but who that person is, you must not expect to learn. Indeed, it can have nothing to do with the share which *you* are required to take in the matter. You saw the other day that Lightfoot was obstinate: it is therefore useless for T. M. and me to negotiate with h m any more. But you told me when I saw you last ni ht t at you had many and cogent reasons for not coming to a rupture with the old man. Surely the thousand guineas T. M. offers you through me—and with the chance of two thousand—will amply remuncrate you for any loss you may sustain in consequence of a quarrel with Lightfoot. Besides, if—as you hinted—he and you are so useful to each other and so mixed up in several matters, he will forgive you in the long run for temporarily turning against him.

"The preceding is a faithful copy of the fragment in the possession of T. M's. principal. You, who have seen the half in Lightfoot's hands, can now judge of the value of the document as a whole. This we must leave to you: because, inasmuch as the obstinate old fellow would not even allow me and T. M. a sight of *his* moiety, we are utterly unable to form an opinion of the tenour of the paper when read and viewed in its complete state. But now observe:—if the document, when read as a whole, confesses marriage—then it is of first-rate importance, and the reward given to you for what we require of you, shall be two thousand guineas. But if the document should be found to contain only a promise of marriage, the sum shall be one thousand guineas, as originally proposed by T. M. Thus stands the matter. If we hear no more from you, we shall conclude that you decline proceeding farther in it: if the contrary be the case, you can write to me at my own house. In this latter alternative, you will do well to use the invisible ink: for although Sir J. would never dream of opening any correspondence addressed to me, it is as well to guard against impertinent curiosity on the part of menials. I told you in my note of this morning that I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening: I hope to hear from you by that time. "L. L."

"Now, then, all mystery is cleared up in respect to the certificate." exclaimed Page, when he had brought the perusal of this letter to an end; "and it does *not* prove a marriage. On the contrary, it shows that the present King and your aunt were never united by any legal ceremony—at least up to the period when that paper was signed."

"Let us put our original half against the copy of the other one," said Julia, "and see how the whole reads."

"We will," returned Page: and, having followed his wife's suggestion, he found that the memorandum or certificate ran in the ensuing terms:—

"TAKE notice, all ye whom it may concern, and know ye, all men, by these presents, that I the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby declare and acknowledge that I do now take and solemnly consider to be my wife in the sight of an all-seeing heaven and before God, the likewise undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, tenderly and devotedly love with all my heart and with all my soul, and who fully as sincerely, tenderly, and devotedly loveth me in return, with all her true heart and all her soul: and know likewise, all persons whom it may concern, that I do solemnly and sacredly bind and pledge myself, before God and in the sight of an all-seeing heaven, that when the will of the Almighty shall so dispose the heart of my august and well-beloved father as to grant his royal and paternal assent and most gracious permission to the proper celebration of my marriage with the undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot,—or, in case of perseverance in that refusal which so very sorely grieves me,—then, on my accession to the royal throne of these realms, on my sire's demise (which God long prevent) I declare that I will, without delay, make her my wife and Queen:—and in token that we do already consider ourselves to be husband and wife, we have jointly and severally set our hands to this document, in the presence of a competent witness, this third day of April, One Thousand seven hundred and fifty seven.

"Witness,
"WILLIAM STAMFORD, Bart.

GEORGE P.
HANNAH LIGHTFOOT."

"Well," remarked Page, as soon as he had read aloud this singular document, "it is no wonder that the King is sometimes crazy. A pretty load of perjury he has got upon his conscience. The whole country would raise its voice in execration of such a man, were this document made public. But that is not our game. We care nothing about the morality of the thing: all we want is to make money."

"And what do you propose to do?" inquired Julia.

"There are two distinct lines of action open to us," answered Page, after a few minutes' deep cogitation. "One is to sell our half of the certificate to that Mr. Meagles of whom you spoke this morning: the other is to try and get the remaining half into our possession, and then dispose of the

complete document to the Government. You see that the fragment which we have *not* got is the most important, because it contains the signatures of the present King and your late aunt."

"But how can we obtain that half?" demanded Julia.

"There is one way—and only one way that I can see," responded Page. "I must call upon Meagles and propose to give him his own price for procuring me the fragment which his principal or employer, whoever he may be, possesses. It would be worth while to venture three or four thousand guineas in such a bargain. We should make ten thousand by it."

"And where are you to get three or four thousand guineas from?" said the young woman, putting the query with some degree of hesitation, amounting even to uneasiness—as if she felt that it was now necessary to reveal something of a disagreeable nature, and that it became impossible to delay the confession.

"Where are we to get such a sum from?" cried her husband, surveying her with astonishment. "Why—haven't we six thousand golden guineas safe in that cupboard?"

"But you must not—you cannot—you dare not pass away many of those coins at the same time," said Julia, speaking with an emphasis which was unusual on her part.

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded Page, with increasing wonderment. "*You* have come by the money honestly, at all events: it is yours by inheritance—and you are not supposed to have any idea of the illegitimate means whereby your father thus enriched himself."

"Ah! I have already told you that my father was a terrible man," observed Julia, with a strange mysteriousness in her tone and aspect; "and he was acquainted with a number of marvellous secrets."

"So much the better for us!" exclaimed her husband. "The gold which those secrets produced him, has fallen into our hands."

"But do you not know what my father originally was?" asked Julia.

"A chemist, I should imagine—or something of that sort."

"Not at all. He was one of the principal coiners in the Royal Mint; and he lost his situation in consequence of being suspected of secreting two or three dies or moulds in which certain pieces of money were cast."

As Julia was giving utterance to these words in a tone of peculiar significancy, a horrible idea stole into the mind of her husband; and, suddenly remembering that letter in the pocket-book which referred to the supply of spurious coin to the bankers at Aylesbury, the sickening suspicion now excited was in a few moments changed into a crushing conviction.

A deadly pallor came over his countenance; and sinking back in his chair, he murmured in a low and hoarse voice, "Give me a drop of brandy, Julia—or I shall faint!"

The young woman hastened to comply with this request; and Page, having drained the wine-glass which she filled with the ardent spirit, began slowly to recover from the consternation that had fallen upon him.

"I had better know the worst at once, Julia," he said, regarding her with haggard eyes. "The contents of those six bags——"

"Are all spurious," she hastened to reply: "there's no use in mincing the matter—and now you've learnt the real truth."

"But you should have told me—you should not have misled me——" began Page, his bitter disappointment now changing into fury.

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Julia, her tone, countenance, and manner all suddenly indicating that she could be a very demoness when roused, difficult though it were to excite her: "you are accusing me wrongfully—and I'll smash your head to pieces with that poker if you give me any more of your nonsense. You sought me out—I did not seek you: you had already made up your mind that my father was a rich miser—and at first I was going to undeceive you;—but your intentions towards myself became apparent—and I held my tongue, suffering you to fancy whatever you chose. Now, then, are we not equal? You married me only because you thought I was wealthy—I married you because I wanted a respectable position."

While she was thus speaking, Julia's eyes shot forth living fires—her white teeth gleamed between the lips which the habit of dram-drinking had rendered of an unnatural red—and her cheeks, which dissipation had robbed of the hues of health, became flushed with the purple dye of rage.

"Come, Julia dear—come—I didn't mean to vex you—I—I assure you I did not," stammered Page, absolutely frightened by the fiendish countenance that thus glared so menacingly upon him. "I was wrong—I know that I was—I——I beg your pardon, Julia," he added humbly.

"Well—you can't do more than that," said the young woman, instantly becoming pacified: and by the aid of a dram she appeared to relieve her feelings altogether. "The only thing you can do, is to make the best of a bad bargain—if you still think it is one. Follow the counsel which my father intended for me in the little scrap of paper scrawled over with a pencil: that is—use the coin wisely, and we shall prosper;—use it rashly, and we shall be ruined."

"By Jove! it is my opinion that we had better not use it at all," exclaimed the ex-traveller.

"That be hanged!" responded Julia. "You have already passed away three or four pieces in to-day's purchases; and you saw that on each occasion, when the shopkeepers rang the money on their counters, they were perfectly satisfied with it."

"True!" observed Page — but not without a shudder at the idea of having passed away no less than four spurious guineas in the course of the day.

"You need have no fear of detection, if you only act with caution," resumed Julia, who possessed no ordinary amount of common sense and sterling judgment. "My father was as skilful in coining base money as he was in his chemical experiments. He might have been immensely rich, if he wasn't so timid. The sordid manner in which he lived was a mere blind, to avert suspicion: and there were times when he enjoyed himself with many luxuries, I can tell you. But it was on account of me chiefly that he would not launch out into a decent way of life. He thought that I was naturally extravagant; and that if I was allowed the use of as much of that spurious money as I

wanted, I should soon be bringing the Bow Street runners about him. The older he got, the more frightened he grew. But he needn't have entertained such fears for me. I have seen too much to act with anything like a flagrant imprudence. And therefore, I tell you again that we may use this money, if we do it cautiously."

"It would really be a sin to forego such a chance," said Page, in a musing manner: "especially after having made a successful beginning with the four pieces that we changed to-day. Besides, after all the vapouring and boasting at Hodson and Morley's, it would be wretched indeed to find ourselves taken down so many pegs. The coin is certainly admirable," he observed, balancing one of the spurious guineas on the tip of his fore-finger.

"Admirable!" repeated Julia: "I am very sure that not even an officer of the Mint himself could detect it, unless he cut it in two. The weight is the same—there's a thin coating of gold all over—and it is cast in one of the Mint dies. My father was turned out of the Society of Friends on account of losing his place at the Mint through being suspected of stealing the moulds. But the authorities could not bring it home to him—and so he escaped punishment."

"And this letter," observed Page, taking from the pocket-book the one that bore the Aylesbury post-mark, and that related to the manner in which the "*goods*," were to be packed and sent,—"this letter, I suppose, referred to some transaction respecting a supply of spurious coin?

"Yes: the Magsman managed the job—and my father coined the money. Three thousand guineas were first despatched to Aylesbury; and a quantity more was ordered. But for some reason which I never heard, this second supply was not sent. I dare say," added Julia, "that it is to this circumstance we are indebted for the possession of the amount in that cupboard."

"Yes—I see by this letter that the bankers intended to have a second remittance of three thousand in six months," said Page. "That would have been on the 17th of last September: but I suppose that they got frightened and revoked the bargain. However, all this does not relate to our own affairs. What we must now do is to endeavour to negotiate with Lady Letitia Lade or Mr. Meagles for the sale of all the papers concerning Hannah Lightfoot's business; and then we will pay a visit to Aylesbury to discover, if possible, a certain Richard Stamford, to whom we can be of great use."

"In what way?" asked Julia.

"He was the gentleman who was confined with me in the cellar underneath that house adjoining your own in the court," returned Page. "But I will tell you all about that baronet and his misfortunes."

Mr. Page then proceeded to narrate to his wife those circumstances in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford which are already known to the reader; and we will now leave the worthy couple to discuss their schemes and their brandy simultaneously—which they did until the clock struck midnight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MR. RAMSEY.

In the meantime scenes of interest were taking place elsewhere; for in the early part of this same evening on which Mr. and Mrs. Page were thus discoursing and enjoying themselves, a tall, handsome, genteel man, enveloped in an ample cloak, landed from a wherry in the immediate neighbourhood of Horslydown, and, having dismissed the boat, sped rapidly towards the Beggar's Staff.

This individual was about eight-and-twenty years of age. His figure was slight, but admirably proportioned, and by no means deficient in strength: his features were regular and of the Grecian cast;—his complexion was of a clear olive—and it would be impossible to imagine finer eyes or more beautiful teeth on the part of one of the sterner sex. His manners were prepossessing, even to fascination; and there was so refined—nay, even so noble an expression in the *ensemble* of his countenance, that an observer would have unhesitatingly marked him as one eminently calculated to make friends with men and conquests amongst women.

It was about seven o'clock, and the evening was very dark, when this individual landed on the bank of the Thames in the vicinity of Horslydown. A few minutes rapid walking brought him to the Beggar's Staff, the exterior of which he however surveyed for a few seconds ere he crossed the threshold, as if to assure himself that it was the place which had been described to him. Satisfied with this brief scrutiny, he boldly entered the boozing-ken, and found himself in the midst of a motley company which seemed to be the rakings of all the vilest dregs of a vile neighbourhood.

The Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll were serving at the bar; and to them did the new-comer address a whispered inquiry for Mr. Joseph Warren.

"Who are you?" demanded the Big Beggarman, eyeing his querist suspiciously.

"My name is Ramsey—Philip Ramsey of Aylesbury," was the immediate response.

"Oh! that's all right!" chimed in Carrotty Poll. "You're not unknown to us, sir," she added, with a sly smile. "Please to walk round;"—and she opened the little gate which led behind the enclosure whence the liquors were dispensed.

Ramsey accordingly entered the diminutive parlour, into which he was followed by the Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll, a slip-shod waiter of marvellously seedy aspect being left to attend at the bar.

"Pray sit down, sir," said the Beggarman. "As my daughter just now observed, your name's quite familiar to us in this here place. In fact, I was one of the party that managed the spree at Stamford Manor a little while back."

"Ah! you allude to the carrying off of the baronet?" exclaimed Ramsey, unhooking his cloak at the collar. "Then you are doubtless a friend and confidant of Joseph Warren?"

"Better knowed as the Magsman," interjected the landlord of the Beggar's Staff. "Yes—me and that fine feller are staunch pals; and what's his business is my business—and what's my business is his'n."

"Is he to be seen now?" inquired Ramsey, whose countenance wore an expression of deep anxiety.

"It is of the greatest consequence that I should obtain an interview with him as soon as possible."

"He is not here—neither is the Gallows' Widow, which is his blowen," answered the Big Beggarman. "They're gone over into Wapping together, and won't be back again to-night."

"Perdition!" ejaculated Ramsey, in a tone of profound vexation. "Every minute's delay is ruinous!"

"Now don't excite yourself, sir," said Carrotty Poll, in a soothing voice. "We can guess pretty well what it is that's annoying you——"

"Sir Richard Stamford is at liberty!" exclaimed Ramsey, interrupting the young woman impatiently, and striking the table with his clenched fist.

"We know it," observed the Beggarman. "But it is not our fault: he escaped!"

"You are not deceiving me?" cried Ramsey, in a tone of mingled excitement and menace. "How can you prove to me that he did indeed escape—and that neither you nor Joseph Warren, nor any of your associates, connived at his flight?"

"Well—it may be a difficult matter for me to convince you, Mr. Ramsey," returned the villain: "but if you was t'other side of the river at this moment, I could take you to the place where the baronet was confined, and show you the hole that he made in the wall of the cellar."

"I am inclined to believe you—I *do* believe you," said Ramsey. "In fact, if I had really suspected treachery on your part I should not have come hither this evening. Mr. Martin assured me that the utmost reliance was to be placed upon Warren—and he urged me to come to London and see him without delay."

"But how did you learn that the baronet had escaped?" demanded the Beggarman: "for the Magsman only wrote this evening to let you know what had happened—and the letter won't reach Aylesbury till to-morrow morning. He was in hopes of being able to discover Sir Richard again, and take him back to his old quarters: and that's the reason why he didn't send you immediate intelligence of his flight."

"Last evening Mr. Martin received the most positive information that Sir Richard had been seen in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury," said Philip Ramsey: "and, as you may suppose, we were stricken with dismay. In fact, it will be ruin to both Martin and myself—positive ruin," added the young man, with frightful emphasis, "if the baronet is allowed to remain many more hours at large. What is to be done?"

"What would you wish to be done?" asked the Beggarman: "and when you have told us, what will you pay for having it done?"

"You are disposed to assist us—to any extent—to any extreme?" said Ramsey, sinking his voice to a low whisper, which was nevertheless full of meaning: and he bent his looks with kindred significancy upon the villain whom he thus addressed.

"Let us understand each other, Mr. Ramsey," observed the Beggarman. "You gave us a good round sum for carrying off the baronet, and keeping him in limbo: and we fulfilled our bargain as far as we could. We don't hold ourselves answerable for his escape—'cause why, we couldn't help it. We put him in a strong and secure place;—and we knowed that we might rely upon Briggs—that's the chap which had him in his care—as well as on our ownselves. He wouldn't sign the paper which you and Mr. Martin had drawn up—and that was no fault of our'n neither. But we should have kept him in the cellar till he did: and if he'd held out much longer, we meant to have *starved* him into compliance. Now, then, you perceive that we did our dooty towards you and your partner as well as we was able: and we don't see that anythink fresh or new which you may want us to have done or to do for you, should be executed free gratis for nothink."

"Your observations are perfectly just and your reasoning is correct," said Ramsey. "We are prepared to pay you well for what you must do next."

"In that case, we shan't have no quarrels," remarked the Big Beggarman. "But how go on matters at Aylesbury? We saw by yesterday morning's paper that Lady Stamford was not dead—that she was not even mortally wounded—and that the Coroner's Inquest was held to examine into the cause of the fire, and not the death of the lady, as was at fust reported."

"It is all these circumstances which render it so necessary that Sir Richard Stamford should either be got out of the way—or else *put out of the way*," returned Ramsey, again fixing a look of dark and sinister meaning upon the countenance of the Beggarman. "The Coroner's Inquest has decided," he continued, "that the fire was the result of accident—caused by a candle being upset on the supper-table. Thus, the charge of arson no longer presses against Sir Richard Stamford. Then, again, a surgical opinion declares that the wound was inflicted on Lady Stamford with her own hand: and therefore the accusation of murder is likewise quashed."

"But the forgeries, Mr. Ramsey—the forgeries?" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Perhaps the less we say on that subject, the better," was the reply, delivered in a sombre and gloomy tone. "But it is useless to remain here, idly conversing on these matters," he continued, his tone suddenly becoming impatient and excited. "Sir Richard Stamford is in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury—we know where he is concealing himself, while he doubtless waits to ascertain how it may turn out with his wife, ere he takes any actual proceedings——"

"And that lady—is she sensible?—can she speak, so as to give any account of matters that may tell against you, sir?" inquired Carrotty Poll: "for the Magsman informed us that you was pretty intimate with her," she added, with a chuckling laugh.

"She is still hovering between life and death," answered Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal his disgust at the grossness of the woman's manner. "But again I say, do not waste time in asking me questions: assist me, if you will," he continued, addressing himself to the Big Beggarman; —"and if not, I must adopt other means to ensure my safety."

"I have not refused to assist you," replied the burly, red-faced villain doggedly; "but you haven't given me no instructions."

"You are dull at comprehending a hint," said Ramsey, with an impatient uneasiness and restlessness which indicated that he had already planned a a terrible deed, but shrank from avowing his thoughts.

"I remember you observed just now that the

baronet must either be *got* out of the way, or *put* out of the way," returned the Beggarman. "Well—it is for you to decide how the thing is to be: and then name the recompense you are prepared to give."

Ramsey turned ghastly pale:—the next moment a crimson hue spread over his countenance;—his eyes glared with a lurid light—and his lips quivered. He looked at the Beggarman, who was cool and collected: he then glanced at the red-haired young woman, whose features were likewise calm and impassable. This survey appeared to give him courage—that ruffian-like courage with which the gentleman-villain is compelled to fortify himself in order to induce his lips to frame the words which shall express the horrible designs that have already been well digested in his secret thoughts.

"Now, then, sir—what is it to be?" demanded the Beggarman.

"You needn't fear to speak candidly to *us*," observed Carrotty Poll, encouragingly.

"In course not," added her father. "We ain't particklar—so long as the blunt is forthcoming;" and he laughed in a manner which made Ramsey's blood run cold in his veins and his flesh creep upon his bones.

"Well—after all, you can but refuse—and there will be no harm done," said the latter, in a musing tone and after a short pause. "But. is impossible that you can misunderstand me for a single moment! In a word—the baronet must be put out of the way—or there will be a general exposure, in which we shall *all* sink!"

"This is serious—but not *too* serious for *us* to undertake," returned the Beggarman. "At the same time, *we* don't fear anythink that may come of such an exposure as you talk of."

"Will five hundred guineas—in good sterling gold—induce you to rid us of this accursed Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded Ramsey, worked up to a pitch of desperation by the ruin that stared him in the face.

"Have you the cash by you?" asked the Beggarman.

"Yes — I have brought it with me," returned Ramsey, producing a heavy bag from beneath his cloak: "and it is yours if you will set out with me for Aylesbury—*to do the deed*—this very night."

As he uttered these last words in a hoarse whisper, he again secured the money about his person,—while his eyes were fixed with an expression of anxious inquiry upon the countenance of the burly villain.

"I will guarantee that it shall be done—but I can't do it alone," responded the latter, after a few instants' deep reflection. "Must it be done to-night?"

"We must set off for Aylesbury to-night," answered Ramsey impatiently. "Martin will be devoured with the most cruel suspense until my return: and I dare not return unless it be with the certainty that the man who holds my very life in his hand ——"

"Well—we won't waste time by talking over it," interrupted the Beggarman. "But we must see the Magsman without delay. He is at the house on t'other side of the river, where the baronet was confined."

"I will accompany you to him," said Ramsey. "Come—let us depart."

"This moment," observed the Beggarman. "We must cross in a boat—but, luckily, we have a wherry of our own—and therefore we sha'n't have to go far to find a means of getting over the river. You will go with us, Poll," said the villain, darting a significant look on his daughter.

"Me, father?" she ejaculated, in a tone of unfeigned surprise.

"Yes—you," returned the Big Beggarman. "Suppose that me and the Magsman sets off at once for Aylesbury with this genelman, there'll be some orders to give you about a many little things to do in our absence."

And, as he thus spoke, he kicked his daughter's foot gently under the table.

"Very well, father," she observed. "I shall be ready in a few minutes."

"Stay—I must put on my rough coat and hat," said the Beggarman. "Beg your pardon, sir, for leaving you for a moment," he continued, addressing himself to Ramsay: "but sha'n't keep you waiting long. May be you'll take a glass of somethink short to expel the cold?"

"Nothing, I thank you," responded Ramsey. "Pray make haste: there is no time to lose," he exclaimed, with an excitement which he could not restrain.

"We shall be ready in a jiffey," said the Big Beggarman; and he thereupon followed his daughter up the steep and narrow staircase which has already been described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SCENE ON THE THAMES.

On gaining a room on the first-floor, Carrotty Poll set down the light on a table; and, looking her father full in the face, she observed in a low and sinister tone, "What do you mean to do with this swell-cove?"

"Now, look here, my gal," was the answer, unhesitatingly given: "the genelman has got five hundred golden boys about him—and them golden boys we mean to have—eh?"

"That's certain," responded Carrotty Poll, her countenance glowing with delight up to the very verge of her flaming and disordered hair.

"Well—and a murder is to be done in order to get the money—eh?" continued the bloated ruffian.

"True again: but do go on—or he'll get tired of waiting and begin to suspect something," exclaimed Poll, with vixenish sharpness. "A murder must be committed, you say?"

"To be sure. And what does it matter to us which is put out of the way—this Ramsey, or that baronet? Besides, it ain't worth while going all the way to Aylesbury to knock a fellow on the head for the purpose of getting five hundred guineas—when it can be done close by, on the river?"

"I understand you, father," said the young woman. "But you and me can't do it alone. Some one must scull the boat?"

"The Kinchin-Grand is in the public-room," answered the Big Beggarman; "and he shall come along with us."

"What! a mere boy—a youth of sixteen or seventeen?" ejaculated Carrotty Poll.

"He's a desperate fellow—and I know he'll serve

our purpose," was the impatient response. "Come—give me my hat and rough coat—and put a pair of pistols in the pockets," he added, in a gruff whisper.

The woman obeyed these instructions without another remonstrance; and as soon as she had put on her cloak, which had a large hood to cover her head—and also to conceal her features, when it was necessary to observe such mystery—the father and daughter descended to the little parlour. Ramsey was waiting for them with an impatience that had become almost intolerable;—and they all three issued forth from the crib behind the bar.

As they traversed the public room, the Big Beggarman beckoned the Kinchin-Grand to join them; and this worthy chief,—who, as it will be remembered, presided over the juvenile thieves that were wont to assemble at a certain flash house in Grub Street,—forthwith abandoned his pipe and his pewter, and followed the party from the boozing-ken.

"Now, then, Bill," said the Big Beggarman, when they had gained the street; "run and get the boat ready. We want to get across as quick as possible."

"All right!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, who was somewhat more decently—or, at all events, more warmly attired than when we first introduced him to our readers: and, having uttered that cheering ejaculation, he hurried on in front to obey the orders which he had received.

The Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and Ramsey pursued their way in silence—the last-mentioned individual entertaining not the slightest suspicion of foul play on the part of his companions. In a few minutes they reached a place where a kind of low and narrow stone-pier went shelving down from the bank of the Thames, until it was lost in the mud at low water; whereas at high tide it was completely covered. To a post fixed by the side of this convenience for landing or embarking, a large wherry was fastened; and the Kinchin-Grand was

standing in the boat when the others made their appearance on the spot. The party entered the wherry and took their places, Ramsey being seated between the Beggarman and Carrotty Poll; and the Kinchin-Grand, having pushed off, betook himself to the oars, which he managed with remarkable expertness.

The wherry shot out from the bank, upon the black bosom of the Thames, which not the feeblest twinkling of moonbeam or starlight now relieved of its sombre gloom: but as the boat drew nearer to the middle of the river, the profile of its shores was marked by the feeble glimmerings which the windows of the houses on either side shed forth.

"Now, Bill," said the Beggarman, "run down the stream. The tide's with you—and you wont have to pull much."

"I understand," answered the youthful reprobate. "Where do you want to land?"

"Just below Execution Dock," was the answer.

There was something which sounded so ominous in this reply, that Ramsey shuddered from head to foot: and now it struck him for the first time that he was in company with three persons who, although one was a woman, were no doubt capable of any atrocity. That the Beggarman was as desperate a villain as any that London contained, he was well aware: that the daughter had not failed to imbibe the example of her sire, he naturally conjectured; —and that the youth who rowed the wherry, was of an equally vile stamp, the glimpse which he had obtained of his features in the public room of the Beggar's Staff, when he was called upon to join the party, furnished pretty conclusive evidence.

All these reflections swept through the mind of Ramsey the instant that an alarm sprang up in his soul; and he repented of his rashness in trusting himself with such companions. There he was, completely at their mercy—in the midst of that silent highway where the voice that cried out for help could be stifled in a moment, and where a grave already yawned, as it were, to enshroud the corpse of a victim!

Commingling with these thoughts, too, were the horrible ideas so suddenly excited in his mind by the mention of the frightful name of *Execution Dock*—the place at which mutineers and all criminals whom the Courts of Admiralty doomed to death, underwent the extreme sentence of the blood-thirsty laws! For Ramsey knew that *he* was implicated in crimes which, if detected, would send him to the scaffold; —and it was therefore no wonder that he shuddered from head to foot as the ominous name of the proposed landing-place fell upon his ears.

"Are you certain of being enabled to find your friend Warren without delay?" he inquired, thus breaking a long silence which had prevailed since the Beggarman gave his orders to the Kinchin-Grand, and during which the boat had shot farther down the stream.

"Quite certain," was the answer, given in a tone which might have had nothing unusual in it, but which the increasing fears of Ramsey construed into a foreboding gruffness.

"And you think that he will consent to accompany us to Aylesbury to-night?" he asked, in that species of nervous humour which prompts men who entertain vague ideas of impending danger to converse with those at whose hands the peril is dreaded, in order to glean from their responses an assurance that such apprehensions are altogether unfounded.

"To be sure I do," answered the Big Beggarman. "Joe is not the feller to let a chance of sacking a good sum escape him."

"So much the better!" exclaimed Ramsey, assuming a tone of cheerfulness, which he was however far from experiencing inwardly. "Shall we soon push in for the shore?"

"There's Execution Dock right ahead of you now," returned the Beggarman, extending his arm in the direction of the ominous spot. "But perhaps your eyes don't get accustomed to the darkness quite so soon as mine?"

"I can see something that appears to hang in the air," said Ramsey, straining all the powers of his vision in order to penetrate the obscurity which prevailed all around. "It is a black object—a thing darker than the darkness——"

"Well—and that's one of them scarecrows that mark Execution Dock at times," observed the Big Beggarman, with a rough chuckling laugh, in which both his daughter and the Kinchin-Grand joined.

"A man hanging?" gasped Ramsey, as his excited imagination made the appalling object even more palpable than it really was—until the very features of the pendent corpse seemed to glare upon him with stony gaze through the darkness of the night.

"Yes—and why not?" exclaimed the Beggarman, with another coarse chuckle. "It's a pleasure to the aristocracy to hang up poor devils who haven't got any influential friends to beg 'em off. But I say, old feller," he continued, his tone experiencing a rapid and ominous change, as he laid his heavy hand rudely upon the shoulder of Ramsey, "you'd better give me that bag of guineas which you've got under your cloak."

"The guineas!" repeated the wretched man, a cold tremor passing over him and freezing the very blood in his veins.

"Oh! you hesitate—do you?" cried the Big Beggarman. "Now, Bill—keep the boat steady!"—and, thus speaking, he threw himself furiously upon Ramsey, whom he overpowered in an instant.

"Villain—miscreant—assassin!" almost screamed the desperate gentleman, as his cloak came off in the useless struggle which he endeavoured to renew against his burly opponent: but having been thrown with his back across the seat, he was unable to offer any effectual resistance, the more especially as Carrotty Poll now lent her aid to her father.

"Steady the boat, Bill—or, by God! she'll capsize," thundered the Beggarman: for the wherry was oscillating frightfully. "Now, sir—give up that gold ——"

"Never!" cried Ramsey, suddenly armed with the courage of despair: and by an almost superhuman effort, he hurled the ruffian back—regaining his own feet instantly.

But Carrotty Poll, who was herself flung aside by this rapid movement on the part of the intended victim, had fallen upon his cloak which lay on the seat; and her arm had encountered something which she felt to be the bag of gold. Plunging her hand into a pocket formed in the lining of the garment, she assured herself that such was the fact;—and in a shrill tone of exultation, she cried, "I've got it, father! Hold him—seize him!"

All this was the work of an instant;—and the Big

Beggarman, regaining his legs, rushed upon Ramsey —threw his arms forcibly round him—and endeavoured to hurl him into the water. But this was not so easily accomplished: it was a struggle for life on the part of the guilty lover of Lady Stamford—and his strength appeared to increase every moment. The boat swayed from side to side in a manner that threatened the entire party with instantaneous immersion—and the Kinchin-Grand, being compelled to steady it as well as he could with the oars, dared not leave his place.

"By God! we shall upset," exclaimed the Beggarman. "Come, Poll—lend a hand ——"

"Miscreant! let me go—you may keep the money —you may have it all," cried Ramsey, in a voice of rending anguish: for he felt that his strength was failing him. "I implore you—I beseech you—mercy—mercy——"

"Bravo! Poll," ejaculated the Big Beggarman, as his daughter at that instant rendered effectual aid; and in another moment the herculean ruffian hurled the shrieking Ramsey over the side of the wherry into the river.

The boat rocked frightfully, as the murderer and murderess sank down into their seats to steady it;—and the Kinchin-Grand, pulling long and vigorous strokes with the oars, made it shoot rapidly away from the spot where this awful deed had been perpetrated.

Then arose from the bosom of the dark water in the wake of the boat, the terrific cry of the drowning man's agony,—a cry which seemed to rend the very air, and which thrilled to the brains of the guilty wretches on whose ears it fell.

"Can you see anything, father?" demanded Carrotty Poll, she and her sire alike straining their eyes in the direction of the spot where Ramsey had now gone down a second time.

"Nothing—nothing: it's all up with him," returned the Big Beggarman, impatiently—for that appalling scream had done him harm, ruffian as he was. "Pull in to the shore, Bill—and quick about it."

"Which way—Execution Dock?" cried the young reprobate;—and, without waiting for an answer, he sent the boat rapidly veering towards that point.

"No—back again—to Horslydown—damn you for a fool!" thundered the Big Beggarman, actually ferocious. "We don't mean to tell the Magsman anything about this affair at all," he added, more mildly.

"Well—don't play the bully, old feller—that's all," said the Kinchin-Grand, without losing his temper: and round went the wherry towards the opposite shore.

Silence now prevailed, and total darkness continued upon the scene,—a silence unbroken even by another cry on the part of the drowning man—and a darkness which seemed to grow more intense after the perpetration of that dread deed!

In a short time the wherry reached the stone pier whence it had started; and the Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand retraced their steps to the boozing-ken, where the last-mentioned individual received fifty guineas as a recompense for his share in the evening's work, as well as to bribe him to the maintenance of strict silence respecting the dreadful transaction.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MEAGLES AND THE AMAZON AT THE BOOZING-KEN.

NEARLY two hours had elapsed since the return of the Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand to the vile den in Horslydown, when the door of that place was thrown open, and Tim Meagles, accompanied by the Amazon, entered the horrible place.

For an instant the eyes of all the revellers present were turned upon Meagles, whose dashing, off-hand appearance and frank, good-humoured countenance disposed them completely in his favour: but the next moment every look was rivetted upon his companion, whose ample bust proclaimed her to be a woman, in spite of her masculine attire.

And well indeed might they gaze with admiration upon the huntress: for never had a more splendid creature burst upon their view. The cold night air had imparted the richest carnation glow to those cheeks that looked so firm and soft; and her fine large dark eyes, so clear and bright, seemed to swim in a living lustre. The black brows, well divided and rather full than thin, set off the stainless white of her high and noble forehead: her coral lips, on which a good-tempered smile was playing, half revealed the pearly teeth;—and her luxuriant hair, dark as night, and glossy as the raven's wing, showered in a myriad curls upon her shoulders. Then her bearing was so graceful and elegant—the garb which she wore so admirably became her symmetrical form, and her shape was characterised by so much unrestrained lightness, that she was all which one might expect to meet in a daring huntress, who was likewise a charming woman.

Such a character was well calculated to win the admiration of the men, and even of the women, who were assembled at the Beggar's Staff: and a murmur of gratification and delight pervaded all parts of the dingy room as the lovely Amazon paused to take a survey of the scene. But that feeling which her presence had immediately engendered, rose into absolute enthusiasm, when, taking three or four guineas from her purse, she unaffectedly tossed them upon the bar, bidding Carrotty Poll supply liquor to the amount, that the company might have the wherewith to enjoy themselves more fully than they were already doing.

Having thus obeyed the first impulse of a disposition naturally generous, Letitia followed Tim Meagles behind the bar; and in a few moments the lady and her companion were closetted with the Big Beggarman in the little parlour.

"You recollect us, my good fellow—don't you?" said Meagles, as soon as the burly landlord had closed the door of the crib.

"Yes—perfectly," was the reply. "You came here, both of you, about six or seven months ago—as near as I can remember—to see the Magsman about a certain paper in old Lightfoot's possession. I know all about it—and I likewise know who you are. You're Mr. Meagles, sir—and you're Lady Lade, ma'am," added the ruffian, with a low bow to the former and a much lower one to the latter.

"You have a good memory," said the Amazon, laughing. "But we are desirous of seeing your friend Warren—and it is about that very same business, too. Is he here to-night?"

"No, my lady—he's not," answered the Beggarman: "and he isn't expected to return till to-morrow, neither. He's over the water—at t'other house——"

"We called there in the first instance this evening," interrupted Meagles; "and he had left, without telling the man Briggs where he was going. That made us come across the river, to the Beggar's Staff: and we should have been here upwards of two hours ago, if it had not been for a little incident which delayed us. But, however," continued Meagles, "it is growing late—and we will not waste time. You know all about the business which brought us hither on the previous occasion of our visiting the Beggar's Staff; —and you can perhaps give us some necessary information now."

"Anything that I can do to serve you, sir, shall be done cheerfully," responded the Big Beggarman, well aware that he was dealing with a good paymaster.

"You already know that we came here the last time, which was six or seven months ago, about a certain paper in Lightfoot's possession," resumed Meagles; "and on that occasion your friend Warren made an appointment for us to meet him at the old man's next day. This appointment we kept: but it led to no good. Lady Letitia subsequently wrote Warren a long letter, containing particular explanations and instructions—and to this letter no answer was ever returned."

"Well—I'm surprised at the Magsman's want of attention in that respect," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, assuming as much politeness as his uncouth nature could possibly permit: "for there was something of importance to communicate, nevertheless. But I suppose that other business turned up suddenly—and he must have put off writing from time to time till he forgot it."

"And what was the subject of importance?" demanded Meagles.

"Why—the letter which her ladyship wrote, and which I saw," continued the Beggarman, "hinted at foul means to obtain the paper. Well, Lord bless you! that very same night that the letter came, me, the Magsman, and Briggs, got into old Lightfoot's crib, and tried to make him surrender the dokiment. But it was no go—and there the matter ended. But the Magsman ought to have reported it in due course."

"And is Lightfoot still dwelling in the same place?" asked the Amazon.

"God bless your sweet eyes!" ejaculated the Beggarman: "he's dead!"

"Dead!" exclaimed both Meagles and the huntress, as if it were in the same breath.

"Yes—he died three or four nights ago," returned the villain; "and his gal has bolted. So I suppose she's taken the papers and everything else with her —leaving the parish, most likely, to bury her old father: for I'm blessed if any body else will."

"Then our hopes are defeated in that quarter," said Meagles, in a tone of vexation. "It was odd that Briggs told us nothing about his death."

"The man did not know the nature of our business," observed Lady Letitia. "We never spoke to him before in our lives;—and it was only in consequence of what Warren told us last June or July—or whenever it might have been—that we were even aware of the fellow's name. We were desired, when we wanted to see Warren, to make inquiries of Briggs or else at this place."

"Just so, my lady," said the Beggarman. "Briggs is as cautious a chap as here and there one."

"But perhaps there is some way of tracing old Lightfoot's daughter," exclaimed Meagles, the thought suddenly striking him.

"We'll endeavour to do so, sir," returned the Big Beggarman; "and if we hear anything we'll let you know. I s'pose a letter, written in the inwisible ink the secret of which you bought of the Magsman, will always reach your ladyship in safety?"

"Oh! certainly," replied the Amazon. "But the address must not be invisible also," she added, laughing.

"I should raythor think not, ma'am," responded the burly villain.

"Well—you will make inquiries after Lightfoot's daughter—will you?" said Meagles, tossing down five guineas upon the table as an earnest of future recompense. "Now, Letitia," he continued, turning towards his beautiful companion, "we will take our departure: and I hope we shall not have to encounter any more adventures such as the one which detained us just now."

"Was it so very unpleasant, sir?" asked the Beggarman, merely by way of making an observation which he fancied to be polite, and not through any sentiment of curiosity—much less on account of any suspicion of the real nature of that adventure.

"I will tell you," said Meagles. "You know already that her ladyship and myself called in the first instance this evening at the house in Shadwell or Wapping, wherever it may be. Well, not finding the Magsman there, as we have likewise already explained to you, we cut across to the stairs at Execution Dock, to take a boat——"

"Ah! an ugly place, *that!*" exclaimed the Beggarman, suddenly becoming interested in the tale.

"Yes—it is indeed," responded Meagles: "and there's a body suspended in chains to a gibbet on the point of land, at this very moment," he added. "It was positively gloomy and dispiriting even to me and my harum-scarum friend here to listen to the dreadful creaking of the irons, as the corpse swung to and fro. But, however—we took a wherry, and were crossing the river, through a darkness so intense that it was something like the one which fell upon Egypt—I mean it might be felt——"

"Well, sir—well?" interrupted the Big Beggarman, impatiently: for he was now still more interested in the narrative—and suspicions of what was coming were rising rapidly and fearfully up in his mind.

"The waterman had scarcely pushed off the boat," continued Meagles, "when a terrific scream—apparently coming from the middle of the river—met our ears."

"And, oh! such a scream—I shall never forget it as long as I live!" exclaimed the Amazon, shuddering visibly. "It still tingles in my ears."

"It must have been very unpleasant," said the Beggarman, in whose ears that scream likewise tingled. "But pray go on, sir: you—you interest me."

"Well—it immediately struck us that it must be a man either drowning or being murdered," resumed Meagles.

"Murdered!—what made you think *that?*" demanded the ruffian, hastily.

"Oh! you may well shudder at it, my good friend," said Meagles: "for, my God! if you had heard that awful—rending—piercing scream of dying agony, you would never forget it. I ordered the

waterman to pull with all his might; though I was fearful that no good could be done, in the pitchy darkness."

"And did you—did you—see anything?" asked the Beggarman, scarcely able to hide the trouble which now filled his guilty soul.

"Egad!" exclaimed Meagles; "it was scarcely possible to see your hand at a distance of six inches from your face—although, by the bye, we *could* see the gibbet and the body through the darkness: but somehow or another, *those things* are never completely hidden, even in the blackest night. There seems to be a Providence in all *that!*"

"Dear me, Tim, how you are wandering!" cried the Amazon; "and here is the worthy landlord all impatience to hear the rest of your story. But I will tell it myself. You must know, then," she continued, addressing herself to the Big Beggarman, "that the waterman who rowed us, pulled manfully—and Mr. Meagles leant over the gunwale on one side, while I did the same on the other. All of a sudden I saw something white—yes—absolutely white through the deep darkness. It appeared abruptly—quick as the eye winks—close by my side of the wherry;—and simultaneously as I caught sight of it, I beheld enough to carry the rapid conviction to my mind that it was a human countenance."

"The devil it was!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, summoning all his self-possession to his aid, while his guilty soul was quaking at the prospect of discovery.

"Yes—it was a human countenance," repeated the Amazon emphatically: "with the speed of thought, I mechanically stretched out my arm—and my hand clutched the hair upon the unfortunate man's head."

"And you saved him?" cried the bloated ruffian with terrific impatience, which Meagles and the Amazon however believed to arise from a feeling of humanity prompting the hope that a fellow-creature was really rescued from a watery grave.

"Mr. Meagles instantly turned to assist me—the waterman likewise lent a hand—and we succeeded in dragging the unfortunate individual into the boat," continued Lady Letitia: "but it was at the risk of our own lives—for the wherry was as nearly as possible being upset by the proceeding."

"And did he speak?—did he say anything?" demanded the guilty ruffian, his fears becoming every instant more appalling.

"He was senseless—and we thought that life must be extinct," replied the huntress. "But we bade the waterman pull back to Execution Dock as quickly as he could—and during the few minutes which thus elapsed, Mr. Meagles rubbed the poor gentleman's hands briskly between his own, while I chafed his temples. By the time the wherry reached the stairs again, we had the satisfaction of knowing that the vital spark was still flickering."

"Ah! a very pleasant satisfaction," observed the Big Beggarman, who could have killed the Amazon and Tim Meagles both—then and there—for what he considered to be their "cursed officiousness" in endeavouring to restore Philip Ramsey to life. "And pray, my lady, what did you do next?" he inquired, still maintaining as much outward composure as possible.

"We landed, and bore the gentleman to the nearest public-house——"

"The Mariners' Arms, I'll be bound?" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Yes—that was the sign: for the name is painted on the lamp," said Meagles.

"Well—we had our unfortunate charge, who was still senseless, conveyed to a chamber," continued Lady Letitia Lade; "and while Meagles and the landlord stripped and put him to bed, I myself ran for the nearest surgeon, whom I speedily found, although perfectly ignorant of that precious neighbourhood."

"And then, I suppose, the doctor pretty soon recovered the genelman?" observed the ruffian.

"By the time I returned, accompanied by the medical man, the patient was already so far recalled to his senses that he was conscious of the attentions which were being ministered," answered the huntress: "but he was still utterly unable to speak—and the doctor said that many hours might elapse before he would regain sufficient strength to enable him to utter a word."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, much relieved. "What sort of a looking fellow was he, my lady?" he inquired, although entertaining scarcely any doubt of the identity of this gentleman with Philip Ramsey.

"Tall—handsome—genteel," replied Meagles: "slightly made—and not thirty years old yet, I should think. Poor gentleman! it will have been a narrow escape indeed, even if he should ultimately recover."

"Is there any danger still, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, hastily.

"Of course there is," responded Meagles: "but the doctor seemed to think he would get over it. However, Lady Letitia and myself did all we could for him—and, come what may, we have nothing to reproach ourselves for. He had but little money in his pockets—and we therefore left sufficient with the landlord of the tavern for present purposes, until we call to inquire after him again."

"Then you don't know who the gentleman is?" said the Beggarman.

"There was not a paper—nor a card—nor any document whatever about his person to afford the slightest clue to his name or abode," answered Tim Meagles: "but his dress and appearance bespoke him to be a gentleman."

"Well, the adwentur' was a singular one," observed the Big Beggarman, who, during the latter part of this conversation, had been revolving a certain scheme in his head: for this rescue and resuscitation of Ramsey seemed to menace the villain with serious peril. "But won't you take some little refreshment, sir—and you, my lady—after the fatigues you've both gone through this cold night?"

"Nothing, I thank you," answered Meagles. "Come, Letitia—we will depart."

The Beggarman affected to open the door officiously—but, instantly turning back again towards the huntress and her companion, he exclaimed, "Well—this is fortunate! There's Joe Warren just come in—and he's gone up by a private way to his own room."

"We may as well see him, in that case," said Meagles, pleased at the intelligence thus abruptly conveyed.

"To be sure," observed the Amazon. "Perhaps he may suggest some scheme which may put us upon the track of Lightfoot's daughter."

"No doubt of it, my lady," returned the Beggarman. "This way, if you please."

As he uttered these words, the ruffian took the candle in his hand, and conducted his visitors up the steep and narrow staircase which has been already described. Continuing the ascent until they reached the loft, the party proceeded in silence: but when the Beggarman removed the straw and raised the trap-door, Meagles exclaimed, "What! have we only come up to this height for the purpose of going down again?"

"Our friend Joe Warren likes to have his private chamber made all safe and secure," answered the Big Beggarman, with a chuckling laugh: "'cause why—there's a reward offered for his apprehension, and the constables know he frequents this house at times. Indeed, if I couldn't rely upon you, Mr. Meagles, and on her ladyship, I shouldn't be ass enough to let you both into the secrets of my crib."

"You have nothing to fear from us, my good fellow," said Meagles.

"Oh! I am well assured of that, sir!" exclaimed the Beggarman, in an assumed tone of hearty confidence. "Please to follow me down these steps—and in a few moments you'll be with Warren."

Meagles and the Amazon unhesitatingly complied with this invitation; and at the bottom of the stairs, the Beggarman, throwing open a door, stood aside to allow them to enter the chamber. They crossed the threshold: and as the light of the candle which the Beggarman held high up, did not reveal to them the presence of the person whom they expected to meet, they simultaneously turned looks of inquiry upon the ruffian. But the door was instantaneously closed with violence;—and they heard the strong bolts shooting into their sockets on the outer side. In another moment the heavy steps of the Beggarman ascending the stairs, fell upon their ears—and then all was silent!

"We are betrayed, Tim!" exclaimed the Amazon, grasping her companion's arm at hazard in the midst of the deep darkness which pervaded the room.

"It seems so, my beauty," returned Meagles. "But cheer up—and the devil's in it if we're not a match for this scoundrel in the long run."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER DARK PLOT.—A DARING ADVENTURE.

On descending into his little parlour, after perpetrating this deed of treachery, the Big Beggarman hastily summoned his daughter from the bar; and, closing the door, he communicated to her all that had taken place.

Carrotty Poll was at first sorely troubled when she learnt that Ramsey had not only been rescued from a watery grave, but was likely to recover altogether; and she impatiently inquired of her father what he proposed to do.

"The business is awkward—very awkward," said the Beggarman: "but my mind is made up to a particular course, if so be you've pluck enough to help me."

"I will do anything, provided I see the utility of it," answered the vile young woman. "But, after all, what have we to dread from this Ramsey? He dares not peach against us. We can tell things of him that would send him to Tuck-up Fair—can't we? Didn't he do as much as admit that he and Martin had committed the numerous forgeries of which Sir Richard Stamford is accused?—and then didn't he pass off all the spurious coin? Really, father, I don't see, when we come to look well at the matter, that there's so much to fear."

"There's everything to fear, I tell you," said the Big Beggarman, savagely. "Don't I know what natur' is?—and suppose that Ramsey shouldn't survive this night's business, but just recover his senses sufficient to peach—isn't there a chance of his repenting on his death-bed of his own sins, and confessing everything to some humbug of a parson? Then out would come all about the spurious coin—the carrying off of Sir Richard Stamford—and this precious evening's affair;—and where should we be? Why—in the Stone Jug before we could look round us."

"That's true enough," observed Carrotty Poll, struck by the soundness of her father's reasoning.

"And then, again," continued the Beggarman, "supposing that Ramsey should recover altogether—wouldn't he be sure to tell the Magsman how we served him out?—and there isn't a more vindictive fellow in all the world than Joe Warren. If he went to the gallows himself along with us, he'd take us there out of pure revenge. And even if he didn't, he'd cut us for ever—and we can't very well do without him. Then there's another point to be considered," added the herculean ruffian, thus rapidly surveying every feature of the emergency in which he and his daughter were placed; "this Tim Meagles and Lady Lade will go and see Ramsey to-morrow—and they will perhaps fish out of him all that has happened; and though they wouldn't very well dare to tell a magistrate, seeing that they have been mixed up with us in this business of trying to get old Lightfoot's papers,—still they would be sure to tell the Magsman—and there we are floored again."

"What do you propose to do, then?" demanded Poll, crossing her thin freckled arms across her scraggy breast.

"I propose to keep Meagles and her ladyship here until to-morrow night," answered the Big Beggarman; "and in the meantime ——"

"In the meantime the Magsman may come and want his room," interrupted Poll sharply.

"I can stall him off for a day or two, my dear," observed her father. "Won't it be easy to tell him that Grumley and his men have been seen lurking about the neighbourhood?"

"Well—go on. What next?" demanded the red-haired young woman.

"You must tog yourself off in your best clothes without a moment's delay," said the Beggarman; "and you must cross the river as soon as possible. Ramsey is lying at the Mariners' Arms—and you ain't known there. You'll pretend to be his sister—or wife—or cousin—or anything you like; and you'll say that having missed your unfortunate husband or relative, as the case may be, you made inquiries, and was horror-struck to hear that a genelman answering his description had been fished out of the Thames this evening. You can hint that he's touched *here*," continued the Beggarman, tapping his forehead significantly; "and that you suppose he attempted to commit suicide in a fit of madness."

"I understand," exclaimed Poll. "Go on."

"Well—of course you'll be dreadfully afflicted—and the people at the Mariners' Arms will feel very much for you. You'll insist on passing the night by

the bed-side of the dear man," continued the astute villain; "and you'll have to force gruel, brandy-and-water, and what not, down his throat. Of course you'll be alone with him—and a good dose of the *Heir's Friend* will put him out of the way altogether," added the Big Beggarman, sinking his voice to the lowest audible whisper, while his hideous countenance expressed all the diabolical significancy of his dark design. "Now do you see my meaning, old gal?"

"I do," answered Carrotty Poll, in an equally subdued and sombre tone. "Anything more?"

"To be sure!" resumed the miscreant, experiencing an infernal satisfaction at the evident approval which his project met at the hands of his daughter. "Towards morning you'll alarm the whole house with your dreadful shrieks—the landlord and landlady will go rushing in—and your poor dear husband or brother will be no more. The doctor will be sent for—all attempts to restore him will be useless. He'll hem and hah—'*consequences of immersion in water*,' and so forth; and then, for family reasons, you would raythor there shouldn't be a inquest. A five pound note will hush up the affair: you get a shell to-morrow—he's put in it—you take him away to Briggs's—and before night he's under ground. Meagles and Lady Letitia may then go and inquire after him as much as they choose."

"But what excuse shall you make for having locked 'em up till to-morrow night?" demanded Poll.

"Why—they can't possibly couple my conduct towards them with this affair of Ramsey," answered the Big Beggarman: "because they don't suspect that you or I had anything to do with it. In fact, they don't know who the man is—nor whether he came in the water by foul play, or accident, or of his own accord. I shall therefore tell them that there was something in their manner I didn't like—I thought it looked suspicious—and I was fearful they were laying a plant to catch the Magsman for some reason or another. I'll have a conversation with them to-morrow night on the subject, and then pretend to be convinced by their arguments that they meant really nothing but what was straight-for'ard and fair. Oh! leave me to deal with them: you play your part well—and we shall get out of this scrape as nice as ninepence."

"Very good," observed Poll: "I'll go up and dress at once."

"And mind you disguise yourself as much as possible," said the Beggarman.

"Never fear," was the response. "Tell the Kinchin-Grand not to go away, as I shall want him to take me over in the wherry."

"All right!" exclaimed her father; and, opening the door, he stepped into the bar, while his delectable daughter hastened up-stairs to arrange her toilette.

In half-an-hour she descended again into the little parlour; and the Beggarman, observing that she was there, went in to satisfy himself that her disguise was sufficient. He had not the slightest fault to find. Her hair was dyed a deep colour, and was carefully arranged in bands: her complexion was darkened to an olive hue;—her very eye-brows and lashes were stained black. She was well dressed—largely padded, so as to create an artificial fulness and plumpness which she did not naturally possess—and, in fine, had effected such a complete transformation in her appearance, that her own father would not have known her if they had met accidentally in the street, and if he had never seen her accomplish the same change before.

"That will do splendidly!" exclaimed the ruffian, his countenance expanding into a grin of delight. "Have you got the—you know what?"

"The phial is here," she answered, significantly tapping the wadded bosom of her silk gown. "Now, help me on with my cloak:—and put up my hood in such a way that it shan't tumble my hair. Those people in the public room musn't see that I am going out such a swell at this time of night; neither must they notice that I'm so changed and pranked up. There—that's right. Now, is the Kinchin-Grand ready?"

"He's gone down to wait for you at the pier," answered the Big Beggarman. "I thought it was better that he should not be seen following you again—as he went out with us in the early part of the evening."

"Good," observed the woman: and, having received some money of her father, she quitted the boozing-ken—her head being so completely concealed in the hood of her cloak, that no one noticed the altered appearance of her features.

The Big Beggarman then sate down in the bar, to smoke his pipe and drink his hot brandy-and-water—while the seedy waiter dispensed the liquors to the various revellers.

We must now return to Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade, whom we left at the moment when they found themselves locked in the chamber whither they had been allured under the false hope of meeting Joe the Magsman.

"It is easy enough to tell me to cheer up, Tim," said the Amazon, in answer to the observation which her companion made, and which we recorded at the end of the preceding chapter: "but I really can find little to be cheerful for. Nevertheless, I am not going to cry—nor yet yield to despair. What do you think is the meaning of all this?"

"I can begin to read the matter—dimly, it is true," replied Meagles, in a subdued whisper: "but still I can see a glimmering which promises to lighten the darkness enveloping this treachery."

"And what are your suspicions?" inquired the huntress, as she leant upon his arm.

"Did you observe nothing peculiar in the ruman's manner when we were telling him the story about the rescue of that gentleman from the water?" said Meagles.

"It struck me once or twice that his remarks were singular, and that he even appeared troubled," returned Lady Letitia: "but I fancied that he was experiencing a deep interest in the narrative."

"Such was the construction which I put upon his words and conduct at the time," said Meagles: "but now that I begin to reflect seriously upon it all, I am convinced that the fellow was in some way or another connected with the affair of that gentleman. He asked so many questions, and seemed so anxious to glean every particular, that the thing looks very suspicious; and you may depend upon it, we should never have experienced this treachery or been thus ensnared if we had not told the scoundrel the story of our adventure."

"It was certainly ridiculous on our part to imagine

that such a man could feel any really humane interest in the matter," observed the Amazon. "But if he be capable of murdering or endeavouring to murder one person," she added with a shudder, "he is not likely to be very particular how he deals with others."

"I do not for a moment apprehend that the villain entertains any such black design in respect to us, my dear Letitia," said Meagles, passing his arm round the lady's waist and pressing her to him. "But rely upon it, that not a hair of *your* head shall be hurt while life remains in my body."

"Oh! I am well assured of *that*, dear Tim," she replied, caressing him tenderly. "Moreover, although I am but a poor weak woman, I possess the spirit and daring of a man: and my own existence would not be sold without a desperate struggle."

"It may suit the fellow's purpose to keep us prisoners here for some hours—perhaps even days," observed Meagles: "but we will try and defeat him. Now, my beauty," he added, whispering softly in his fair companion's ear, "let us see whether we cannot effect our escape. The adventure will be a pleasant one—eh?"

"Delightful, Tim!" responded the Amazon, her glowing bosom palpitating against his breast with the excitement of the idea. "But how shall we proceed? It is as dark as pitch—and we cannot even obtain a glimpse of anything in the room."

"There is a window somewhere in this direction," said Meagles, groping his way cautiously. "I saw enough of the chamber during the few moments that the ruffian held the light at the door, to observe its principal features. Ah! here it is!"

He drew aside the curtain which covered the small casement; and the room was just so much relieved of its black darkness, as to enable the two friends to trace the outlines of each other's form, without however distinguishing a feature of the countenance.

"Now let us find a chair, my beauty," said Meagles: "and you shall sit on my knee for a few minutes, while we hold a council of war. There—that's right. Now give me a kiss—and we will begin our discussion. Good!" he exclaimed, when the Amazon had withdrawn her moist lips from his own. "In the first place, let us reflect in which part of the house we are located."

"This window must look out at the back," said Letitia, who was seated on Meagles' knee, with one arm round his neck. "Of *that* I am confident, judging by the situation of the staircases which we mounted and the turnings we took."

"Yes—you are right enough," observed her companion, after a few moments' reflection. "The next point to consider is, on which floor are we? The house is not a high one—*that* we know: as we have seen it from the outside. We ascended two flights of stairs—and that loft which we entered may be called the second storey. Well, then we descended again to this crib;—and consequently we are on the first-floor. Now, having ascertained so important a point, it remains to be determined whether we can escape from the window. Let us see if it is protected by bars."

Meagles rose, and cautiously opened the casement. There was no iron-work to prevent an egress in that direction: but when he looked forth and endeavoured to penetrate the intense darkness without, he could not possibly discover how deep the yard lay below. That there *was* a yard, or some such enclosure at the back of the premises, he however felt convinced: because the adjacent buildings hemmed in with their black walls a small square open space.

But it did not at all follow that this yard must be upon the same level with the street. There might be under-ground kitchens belonging to the premises; in which case the yard would be a dozen feet, or even more, lower than the ground in front of the house. The object, then, was to form a rope long enough to meet this contingency.

Having carefully discussed all the chances for and against them, Tim Meagles and the Amazon resolved to undertake the adventure. Once let them get down into the yard, and they were resolved to arm themselves with anything they could convert into weapons of defence, and then endeavour to fight their way through all opposition which might present itself. There was also the probability of the existence of some outlet from the back part of the premises; in which case they would be spared the necessity of attempting to force their way through the house. At any rate, they were determined to risk the venture: and, if they failed, they could but be made captives again.

"Now, my Amazonian confederate," said Tim Meagles, gaily, "let us see whether the bed will furnish us with materials sufficient for our purpose: otherwise all our fine schemes melt into the air at once."

Groping their way in the dark to the alcove in which the bed stood, they speedily satisfied themselves that the sheets, the blankets, and the coverlid were all there: and to work they went. Meagles had a clasp-knife with him; and the articles of bedding just enumerated, were soon cut into halves. They then twisted the pieces, and fastened them together; and having calculated the greatest height which the window could possibly be from the yard below, they found that the rope thus manufactured was amply long enough. But to make sure doubly sure, they likewise cut the carpet into strips, which they plaited together; and then attached this supplementary piece to the rest.

Having accomplished this important incident in their proceedings, Tim Meagles and his heroic assistant removed the bed close up to the window, in order that there should be some solid object unto which they might fasten one end of the rope.

"Now, Letitia dear, I shall descend first," said Tim: "and then I can steady the rope for you."

"No—I am lighter than you," observed the huntress, emphatically: "and I will go first."

"But for the very reason that you are so much lighter, my darling," exclaimed Meagles, "the rope will oscillate all the more dangerously. In a word, I insist upon descending before you—or I abandon the attempt at once."

"Well—have your own way, you wilful fellow," said the Amazon. "But kiss me first—and then away with you."

Meagles embraced his heroic companion; and then, disengaging himself from her arms—for during a few moments she clung to him as if entertaining a presentiment that some dreadful accident was about to happen to him—the intrepid Tim passed himself, limbs foremost, out of the window.

Courageous as Lady Letitia naturally was, she shuddered and felt sick at heart as she beheld her paramour clinging to the rope outside the casement: but a few reassuring words which he conveyed to her in a subdued whisper, relieved her of the apprehen-

sions which had struck a chill to her heart—and a glowing excitement sprang up in her bosom.

She looked forth from the window: but when Meagles had descended a few feet, his form became absorbed in the utter darkness which prevailed;—and the Amazon, with suspended breath and upheaved bosom, listened to assure herself that he was performing the perilous journey in safety. She likewise kept her hands upon the rope to feel if it continued to maintain that tightness of tension which the weight of Meagles imparted to it;—and thus two minutes dragged their slow length along!

But at the expiration of that time the rope became suddenly loose in her grasp;—and immediately afterwards it was shaken from beneath—the serpentine motion thus given to it undulating up to the very extremity where it was attached to the heavy bedstead. Then the Amazon knew that Meagles had descended in safety, and that the coast was clear below;—and, animated with a still more fervid excitement than before—for she entertained no fears on her own account—the brave woman committed herself to the rudely-formed rope.

Meagles held it firmly in the yard beneath, and likewise kept it at a convenient distance from the wall of the house: the task, so far as it regarded the adventurous lady, was therefore much facilitated.

And now, with her delicate hands grasping the twisted sheet and blanket, and with her legs clutching it also, the Amazon gradually lowered herself—each knot in the rope tempering the rapidity of her descent,—until she reached the bottom in safety, and was caught in the arms of the delighted Tim Meagles.

Well, indeed, was it for them that they had made their rope of such a length: for the yard was far below the level of the street on which the front of the house looked.

Not a moment was now to be lost. The sounds of uproarious revelry reached their ears from the pub-

lic room, and warned them that they had still much to contend against, unless there were an outlet from that yard otherwise than through the house. But a few moments' rapid investigation convinced them that there was not: and no alternative remained but to adopt their original resolution of forcing their way into the street.

A low window, apparently belonging to a kitchen, looked into the yard; and as no light shone forth, they concluded that the place was unoccupied at the moment. Thither they accordingly penetrated; and, their conjecture as to the nature of the room being correct, they provided themselves with the fire-irons as weapons of defence. Meagles then led the way up a narrow and dark flight of stairs, with a formidable shovel in his hand: while the Amazon followed, wielding a huge poker.

Slowly and noiselessly did they proceed, until a door at the top of the steps barred their passage; and the close vicinity of shouts and laughter informed them that this door led direct into the public room.

"The moment I open," said Meagles to the Amazon, in a whisper only just audible, "do you spring into the apartment and make for the street. Attempt not to look behind you—don't waste a thought upon me—every instant will be precious. We have got thus far—and we will not spoil the adventure by any folly on our part."

"I am ready," responded the Amazon, grasping the fire-iron firmly.

The door flew open—and she darted into the room. Meagles was close behind her;—and their sudden appearance, armed as they were, made all the revellers leap from their seats and crowd round them in an instant.

"Let us pass, good people!" exclaimed Meagles, raising his formidable weapon over his head, and sweeping the host of villanous faces with his menacing looks.

"Stop them!" thundered the Big Beggarman, rushing from behind the bar: and, elbowing his way with marvellous rapidity through the group, he laid a violent grasp upon the collar of the Amazon's coat.

Without an instant's hesitation the heroic lady felled the ruffian with a tremendous blow dealt by the heavy poker: and the Big Beggarman lay senseless at her feet.

"Serve him right!" ejaculated a dozen voices.

"She has got a noble spirit of her own!" cried one, following up the cry.

"She treated us just now like a Princess, as she is," vociferated another.

"And I will treat you again, good people—if you will aid us to escape from the clutches of that treacherous villain," cried Lady Letitia, pointing indignantly down at the Beggarman: then, at the next moment, she drew out her purse and showered its glittering contents amongst the delighted men and women gathered around.

An instantaneous scramble took place; and Meagles, seizing Letitia by the hand, led her hurriedly forth from the vile den. Not a finger was raised to bar their passage: they gained the street in safety—and, on pausing for a moment at the end of Horslydown to listen, they could hear the enthusiastic shouts of the motley company in the boozing-ken, but not a footstep in pursuit.

Throwing away their weapons, they exchanged hasty syllables of congratulation at this successful adventure, and plunged hand in hand into the maze of streets lying between Horslydown and the vicinity of London Bridge.

In half-an-hour they reached the main thoroughfare in Southwark; and thence they took a hackney-coach to Meagles' lodgings in Jermyn Street, where they arrived shortly after one o'clock in the morning. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate—a good cold supper was spread upon the table—and the two friends speedily indemnified themselves for the fatigues, annoyances, and perils they had encountered during the past five or six hours. They then retired to repose in each other's arms, it being too late for the Amazon to return to her own dwelling.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CARROTTY POLL'S RETURN TO THE BOOZING-KEN.

When Lady Letitia Lade emptied her purse amongst the revellers at the Beggar's Staff, there was such a scramble for the gold and silver thus lavishly poured forth, that not a soul thought of rendering assistance to the Big Beggarman, who lay senseless on the floor, stunned by the blow the Amazon had so effectually dealt him. And all the while the men and women were employed in picking up and searching for the coin, they vociferated the most enthusiastic cries in praise of the generosity of the beautiful huntress.

At length an old crone, who had succeeded in securing a guinea as her share of the bounteous gift, took compassion upon the burly landlord; and the waiter, having likewise profited by the scramble, now proceeded in a leisurely manner to lend his aid. Some water was sprinkled upon the ruffian's countenance—some brandy was poured down his throat—and in a short time he opened his eyes.

His senses were however slow in resuming their empire—for the chastisement he had received was severe: and when at last he was enabled to collect his scattered ideas, and exercise the powers of his memory, he broke out into the most diabolical imprecations against the whole company for having allowed Meagles and Lady Lade to escape. This proceeding on his part only provoked the laughter, jeers, and low witticisms of those whom he thus reviled; but his wrath was somewhat appeased on learning that the Amazon had showered gold and silver in profusion amongst the crew,—for the greedy ruffian was well aware that the larger portion thereof would find its way into his till ere sunrise.

A strong glass of hot brandy-and-water, the alcoholic spirit preponderating in quantity over the elementary fluid, restored the Big Beggarman pretty well to his ordinary humour: but he still experienced a racking pain in the head. Being curious to discover how his late captives could possibly have made their escape, he ascended to the chamber where he had imprisoned them;—and the bed dragged up to the window—the open casement—the absence of all the sheets, blankets, and coverlid, as well as the very carpet—and then the rope itself, rapidly developed to his amazed comprehension the desperate means which had been adopted by Meagles and the Amazon to

emancipate themselves from confinement at the Beggar's Staff.

Atrocious villain though he were, and savage as he felt at the circumstance of this escape, he could not help admiring the courage which the incident displayed on the part of the fugitives.

Retracing his way to the bar, he described all he had seen to the company present: for they already knew quite enough to render it unnecessary to keep from them the most wonderful episode in the history of the escape;—and those who heard him, soon became too much absorbed in the interest of the details which he thus gave them, to find leisure to question him as to his original motives for imprisoning Meagles and the lady at all.

Vociferous was the applause with which the health of the daring couple was proposed and drunk;—and the orgie was continued in a manner well suiting the vile place and well worthy of the vagabonds, thieves, prostitutes, and hideous wretches assembled there.

Are there such houses, and are there such people, in London at the present day? This is a question which many of our readers will ask themselves and each other. The reply is a bold affirmative: for most assuredly there *are!* And whose fault is it? That of the Government and the Legislature!

Yes—it is the fault of our rulers that the noxious weeds of vice and demoralization flourish in such luxuriant rankness as they do. What do your lords and baronets know of the poorer classes?—what notion can they possibly have of the causes of that terrible depravity which exists, in such widely spread and intricate ramifications, amongst those whom they denominate *the lower orders?* They make grand speeches upon the immorality of the millions—and they taunt the victims of vice with their profligacy: but they do nothing—absolutely nothing—to establish a remedy. It is monstrous and absurd to take an aristocrat and make him a Minister. He naturally labours only to aggrandize the Order to which he belongs—and he utterly neglects the People. Thus the millions are inevitably sacrificed to a wealthy, despotic, and luxurious oligarchy.

Let a Minister be taken from the People,—a man who knows what the People are—who has made himself acquainted with all the miseries of the poorer classes, and who understands the springs and causes of that demoralization which fills the low boozing-kens with revellers, and furnishes so many victims to the scaffold, the penal settlement, the hulks, and the gaol—aye, and so many prostitutes to the streets. Such a man would be well aware how to grapple with the evil. *He* knows that Poverty—and nothing but poverty—is the origin of the tremendous mischief, which exists as a shame and a scandal in that country so falsely called *Free and Civilized England.*

And what causes this Poverty—this Penury—this Destitution which renders intolerable the lives of *millions* in a country naturally possessing, in the resources of its soil and the enterprise of its sons, every element of a consummate prosperity? It is the fact that all the land and all the wealth are held in the possession of a few: it is the abhorrent anomaly that where one has plenty—a thousand are starving,—where one counts his money by hundreds of pounds, a million count theirs by pence! The iniquitous laws of primogeniture and entail—the absence of any statute to regulate the accumulation of capital—the awful monopoly which capital so accumulated constitutes, and the tremendous tyranny which it engenders,—these are the springs of that Pauperism which sits like an incubus upon the bosom of fair Britannia!

Oh! deplorable—heart-rending—and shocking is it to contemplate the misery in which the toiling, industrious millions of these islands exist! "*Death from starvation*"—this is a common verdict returned by Coroners' juries in this country. Will ye believe it, O glorious people of France?—will ye believe it, O enviable people of the United States of America?

Our sickly sentimentalists and maudlin saints raise their eyes and lift up their hands with horror, when they talk of negro slavery in the land of Washington. But they forget—no, they do not forget—they wilfully shut their eyes to the truth that the enslaved blacks in the United States are an enviable race when compared with our English myriads of famishing sons and daughters of toil and our starving paupers. Talk of tyranny and oppression! Why—where is greater tyranny practised than in England towards the poor? O ye vile hypocrites who assemble at Exeter Hall! dare not to say a word against the fine people of the Transatlantic Union, when so much cruelty is practised in this country! There breathes not a nobler—more generous—more enlightened—more free—nor more estimable nation on the face of God's earth than the Americans:—slavery is a black spot upon their civilisation, it is true—but that spot is absolutely white when compared with the stain of hellish dye which the miseries of our own poor stamp upon the name of England!

To resume the thread of our narrative: long was the orgie continued at the Beggar's Staff. Ribald jokes elicited peals of laughter: obscene songs were welcomed with vociferous applause. An occasional quarrel and consequent fight varied the interest of the proceedings; and at last two or three of the younger women present stripped themselves stark naked and danced madly under the influence of brandy. Their lascivious movements, disgusting attitudes, and abominable freaks raised the delight of the spectators to a positive delirium;—and the liquor flowed so plenteously that the Big Beggarman was perfectly correct in his calculation that every penny of the sum so liberally bestowed by the Amazon would find its way ere morning into his till.

At length, between four and five o'clock, some of the vagabonds and prostitutes began to stagger away to their own dens: others, who were utterly incapable of taking care of themselves, were borne off by their less inebriate friends;—and gradually a clearance took place. For a short time the singing and shouting were transferred to the adjacent streets; and the neighbours, who were startled from their slumbers by the untimely din, thus received unmistakable warning that the company at the Beggar's Staff was breaking up.

Thus, while at the West End of London titled dowagers were sleeping comfortably with their fat butlers, widowed ladies of rank with their handsome footmen, Honourable Misses with the noble father's pretty pages, and fashionable demireps with elegant guardsmen,—while, in fact, the luxurious immorality and voluptuous profligacy of the *upper classes*

enjoyed all the delights of secure and well concealed sin,—the loathed and despised wretches of the vile districts of the metropolis were quitting their orgies and returning to their squalor, their rags, and their wretchedness in those dens which they called *their homes!*

The slipshod waiter had closed the door of the Beggar's Staff—extinguished the lights in the public room—and retired to his bed which he made up in the kitchen;—but the Big Beggarman remained smoking and drinking in the little parlour behind the bar, in case his daughter should return before the place was opened to the morning customers.

On ordinary occasions this man could drink an incredible quantity of potent liquor without experiencing its intoxicating effects: but, in the present instance, he was far advanced towards a stage of complete ebriety. Not only had he considerably exceeded his usual *quantum*, large as this allowance invariably was; but the exciting occurrences of the evening and the night, not forgetting the severe blow on the head which he received from Lady Letitia, had assisted the brandy in exercising a strong influence over him.

But still he continued to drink and smoke, until his countenance glowed like a furnace—the flesh round his eyes became so swollen that the twinkling orbs seemed buried in valleys of a purply livid flesh—and every vein in his forehead was swollen almost to bursting.

It was about six o'clock on that cold, misty, winter's morning, when an imperious knock at the street door of the establishment aroused the Big Beggarman from his solitary orgie; and staggering cumbrously out of the parlour, he proceeded to answer the summons. As he had suspected, it was Carrotty Poll who thus sought admission;—and, on entering the place, she proceeded without uttering a word into the bar, where she helped herself to a large dram of brandy. Then, sinking almost exhausted upon a chair in the parlour, while her father resumed his own seat, she threw back her hood and revealed a countenance a trifle more menacing in its vixenish ferocity than that of a tiger-cat.

"Well, Poll—what is the matter?" demanded the Beggarman, speaking with the hiccough and the thickness of ebriety. "You seem out of sorts a bit. But tell us what you've done?"

"Nothing — nothing at all!" replied the young woman, who appeared as if she would have given worlds to have had some one to vent her diabolical ill-humour upon. "The thing has been a dead failure: and what's more, the Magsman knows all about it."

"Then you must have been and told him, you slut!" exclaimed the ruffian, savagely.

"You're a liar, father," shrieked Carrotty Poll, in the most thrilling intonation of her vixenish voice. "But it's no wonder that you begin to abuse me—for you're as drunk as a beast."

"Well—p'raps I am," said the Beggarman, chuckling: for he was in that state when the very accusation of being intoxicated appeared a capital joke. "But, come—we won't quarrel, Poll," he added, more seriously. "Tell us all that has happened. First, however, let me know whether the Magsman is much put out concerning this affair."

"He didn't seem to care very much about it; but he insisted that you would let Meagles and Lady Letitia go away in safety the moment I came back to give you this message," observed Carrotty Poll: "for they are good people—and he knows very well that they won't trouble themselves about you or your concerns."

"By goles! they've gone of their own accord," said the Beggarman.

"Gone!—what—escaped?" ejaculated his daughter, with unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes: mizzled—bolted," rejoined the villain;—and he proceeded to relate the manner in which the prisoners had emancipated themselves—not forgetting to mention the chastisement inflicted upon him by the Amazon.

"Ah! she's a woman of spirit—a splendid creature!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, who was in such a bad humour with her father that she was rejoiced to hear of his misadventure.

"But do tell us all that has taken place in your affair," again urged the Beggarman. "How the devil came it to prove a failure?—and how was it that the Magsman heard anything about it?"

"I'll explain the whole business in a very few words," said the young woman; "and then I shall be off to bed—for I'm tired, and ill, and disgusted."

"And why the deuce are you disgusted?" demanded her father, brutally.

"Because you've managed the whole affair badly," replied Poll. "But I'll tell you what has happened. The Kinchin-Grand ferried me over to Execution Dock;—and I told him to make his boat fast and go somewhere in the neighbourhood to amuse himself—but to mind and go down to the wherry every hour to see if I was there waiting for him. Well, I went on to the Mariners' Arms and played the tragedy heroine to perfection," continued the young woman, getting into a better humour at the remembrance of her skill in enacting the part to which she alluded. "I inquired amidst a torrent of tears for my 'beloved husband'—taking very good care, however, to ascertain that he still continued speechless, before I went up into his room. And when I got there, I found to my annoyance that the officious landlady had provided a nurse to attend upon him. I threw myself upon him, and kissed him, I can assure you, with a very great deal of sincerity: for he is really an uncommon handsome young man, and I don't wonder at Lady Stamford's taste. He was quite conscious, but unable to move or speak: however, I saw that he was amazed by my caresses—especially as, thanks to my disguise, he could not form the least notion who I was. At last he closed his eyes, as if to collect his ideas and ponder who I could be; and I seized that opportunity to tell the old nurse that he was touched in the brain and had not recognised me. But it struck me that the woman eyed me with suspicion: she seemed to have an idea that something was wrong, although she couldn't perhaps tell what. Ramsey fell asleep—and we sate watching by his side. Several times I suggested that certain things should be done, in the hope of getting the old wretch to leave the room, if only for a moment: but she always found some excuse for sticking at her post. I could have strangled the crone outright," added Poll, bitterly: "but I was compelled to be civil to her—and this put me into a still worse humour."

"Devilish provoking!" exclaimed the Beggarman. "But go on."

"Well—several hours passed in this annoying way," continued Poll; "and at last Ramsey awoke

again. He muttered a few inarticulate words, and then began to gaze steadfastly upon me. I was forced to caress him—but he repulsed me with aversion; for he had by this time recovered sufficient power to enable him to use his hands feebly. I whispered to the old nurse that his brain was still wandering;—and she smiled faintly—I thought, incredulously. Some medicine had been sent by the doctor—and I was resolved to make an effort to accomplish the purpose in view. I accordingly approached the mantel—turned my back towards the nurse in such a way that she could not see what I was doing—and hastily mixed some of the poison with the draught. Then, advancing towards the bed, I told the nurse to raise the patient in her arms, while I administered the dose. She obeyed me instantly—and I began to think that my idea of being suspected by her was unfounded. But never—never shall I forget the change that came rapidly over Ramsey's countenance, as he sate up, supported by the old woman. He first gazed on me for a few instants with the most steadfast earnestness: then his features expressed a horror which in less than a minute completely convulsed them—and all in a moment, like a flash of lightning, he recognised me!"

"What—did he say so?" demanded the young woman's father.

"No: but I saw it in his manner—in his countenance," responded Carrotty Poll. "It was as easy to read what was passing in his mind, as if it was a printed book. And then his conduct showed that he knew who I was in spite of my disguise: for the instant I put the glass to his lips, he recovered power enough to dash it out of my hand, and exclaim, '*No! no!*' The nurse let him fall back upon his pillow; and he covered his face with his hands, moaning in a piteous manner. '*His brain wanders still,*' I said to the old woman, as I threw the medicine into the fire-place.—'*Why did you chuck it away?*' she demanded, fixing on me a look that seemed to pierce me through and through: '*I could have made him take it.*'—Now, you know that I am not wanting in presence of mind: but I admit that I grew so confused, I was at a loss what to do; and inventing some excuse—I really forget what—I left the room, not once looking back, for I felt convinced that the old hag was staring after me with her nasty grey eyes."

"I dare say it was all fancy on your part, Poll," said the Beggarman. "The crone's ways were peculiar, p'raps——"

"Well, it might be so," interrupted the young woman: "but I didn't stop to make those reflections at the time. To tell you the truth, I was glad to get away; for I began to think that the nurse would alarm the house, and the landlord might keep me till he could send for a constable. Well, I left the room, as I told you: this was about an hour ago—and as the Mariners' Arms is an early breakfast-house for labourers and colliers employed at the docks and wharfs, the potman was taking down the shutters. There was a light in the bar; and just as I was going out, who should come in to get a morning dram, but Joe Warren?"

"He was up be-times, at all events," observed the Big Beggarman. "Of course he recognised you!"

"To be sure—in a moment," answered Poll; "because he has often seen me decked out in this way. Before I could give him a look to prevent him from speaking to me, he asked what the deuce was going on, and insisted on my taking a drop of brandy with him. Then the talkative potman began to inquire of me how the gentleman up-stairs was; and the fellow gabbled away at such a rate that Joe Warren heard quite enough to make it impossible for me to tell him any lies about it. He followed me out; and I thought the best plan was to explain the whole matter to him, just for all the world as if neither you nor me ever meant to keep it a secret. He said he didn't care much about Ramsey's affair, and told me to mind and tell you to put away his share of the five hundred guineas; as everything relating to the Aylesbury bankers was a matter in which he had his claim for *regulars*.* I assured him that you had already done so; and the business was thus made square enough. He then ordered me to have Meagles and Lady Lade set at liberty the instant that I returned; and he said that you needn't trouble yourself about Ramsey—as he'll attend to *him*. He also observed that he intended to make a call this evening in Pall Mall—you know where—and it is very likely you won't see him again till to-morrow night. We then parted—and I found the Kinchin-Grand waiting for me at Execution Dock."

"Well—and why the devil should you pretend to be disgusted with the whole affair?" demanded the Big Beggarman. "In my opinion, it's gone off uncommon well—especially since our friend Joe isn't put out about it, and will undertake to keep Ramsey quiet."

"I am disgusted," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish acerbity, "because you have made a mull of the thing. You never ought to have played your tricks on Meagles and Lady Lade. One is a devilish good fellow—and the other is a nice woman; and they might have been good friends to us."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" growled the Beggarman.

"Because when you had locked 'em up, it was too late. However," she added, in a milder tone—for she saw that her father was in no humour to be upbraided,—"what's done can't be helped: but I am preciously annoyed at having lost so many hours in such a stupid affair as this expedition to the Mariners' Arms—tired as I was already;—and then that cursed old nurse annoyed me more than enough."

"Well—go and sleep off your ill-humour, Poll," said her father. "I shan't be sorry to get to-bed myself."

The parent and daughter then retired to their chambers;—and during the next three hours a profound silence reigned throughout the Beggar's Staff, until the slipshod waiter rose at about nine to open the premises again—for, as it was a Sunday morning, he had snoozed a little later than usual.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. BRACE AND HER VISITORS.

It was the Sabbath evening; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her exquisitely-furnished parlour. Some of her young ladies had gone to pass the day with their parents or friends: others had obtained permission to "go to church"—which meant that they had certain little amatory appointments to keep; and a few remained in their own apartment, chatting together or reading novels.

* Fair proportion of the plunder.

Mrs. Brace had, as a matter of course, attended divine service in the morning at St. James's Church; and no one present on the occasion had appeared to pay a more marked attention than this lady to the eloquent discourse of the Reverend Dr. Twaddler. On issuing forth from the sacred edifice, when the ceremony was concluded, she had observed to two or three female friends whom she encountered in the porch, "What a beautiful sermon!"—and, having thus sustained her reputation of being a woman having a due sense of religion in her soul, she returned home laughing in her sleeve at the facility with which a character for piety is obtained in this land of cant, humbug, and hypocrisy.

And now—at about six o'clock in the evening of this same Sunday—we find the handsome milliner seated by the cheerful fire in her elegant little parlour, and amusing herself with a Number of the *Town and Country Magazine*—a publication which chronicled the fashions and scandal of the times, and which, being written in a style that would bring a blush to the cheek even in a brothel, enjoyed a large circulation amongst the aristocratic classes.

For the prurient imaginations of ladies in high life have ever revelled in scenes of licentiousness, whether described in books or delineated in pictures. For this reason Shakspeare's works are so greedily devoured by them:—and what well-born Miss of sixteen has not perused Byron's *Don Juan?* Let aristocratic papas and mammas examine the shelves in the library; and they will find that the books most frequently in request amongst the young ladies, are *Tom Jones*, *Joseph Andrews*, and *Peregrine Pickle*. Again, look in the fashionable print-shops, and contemplate the engravings which, from their price, can find purchasers only in wealthy circles—and you will not fail to observe that they are nearly all invested with an air of voluptuousness. Half-naked bosoms lend their charms to these pictures;—and the same may be said of the plates which embellish *Annuals*, *Keepsakes*, and *Books of Beauty*. Is not this true, reader? But if another proof be requisite to support our argument, it is found in the plays produced at the theatres frequented by the Fashion and the Aristocracy; for those pieces which abound in the most indecent allusions or in scenes which furnish food for an impure fancy to elaborate, are invariably the most successful. And that ladies in high life only affect morality, and really care nothing about it in their hearts, is undoubtedly demonstrated by the circumstance that, whereas they shrink in loathing and horror from contact with the daughter of crime who may chance to cross their path as they step from their carriage into the lobby of the theatre—yet they enter that theatre with the foreknowledge that they are about to behold the acting or listen to the warbling of women whose profligacy and dissoluteness are notorious throughout the civilised world. Let us not, then, be again told of the immorality of the millions: let not the titled, the high-born, and the wealthy set themselves up as examples;—for when they thus insolently arrogate to themselves the right of being taken as models, they become breathing—living—walking lies!

It was six o'clock, we said—and Mrs. Brace was seated in her own private parlour.

She was dressed in a style of the most becoming elegance;—and, though in her fortieth year, never perhaps had she appeared so truly handsome. Her hair, as Florimel had observed on a former occasion, was radiant in its glossy blackness:—a soft tint of artificial red blended so finely and delicately with the natural white on her plump cheeks, that the presence of the roseate cosmetic would not have been suspected by even the most experienced observer;—her well-shaped nose, with a scarcely perceptible rising in the middle, imparted a graceful air to her countenance;—her mouth, pouting but not gross, was soft even to the eye, and, when smiling, revealed a set of teeth dazzling and perfect;—and the whiteness of her neck continued with an increasing delicacy and transparency to the full bosom, which was only half-concealed by the low corsage of her dress.

There was altogether about this charming woman such a halo of voluptuousness tempered by an exquisite refinement of manner,—such a melting sensuousness relieved by a winning grace,—such an admirable blending of physical charms with moral fascinations,—that even a youth of sixteen might have forgotten her forty years and have fallen at her feet, languishing for her smiles.

The time-piece on the mantel had proclaimed, with its tinkling silver bell, the hour of six, when Harriet, the confidential lady's-maid, threw open the door and announced "Mr. Harley."

Mrs. Brace instantly rose from her seat, and advanced to welcome her visitor with profound respect—and yet with a smile which divested her manner of anything bordering on servility or cringing sycophancy.

"I received the note which your Royal Highness——" began the lady.

"Hush! am not I always *Mr. Harley*—plain Mr. Harley—within these walls?" interrupted the Prince, as he pressed Mrs. Brace's hand in his own. "Whenever you are indiscreet enough to address me otherwise than by my pseudonym, I shall silence you thus;"—and, passing his arm round her waist, he drew her towards him and imprinted a long kiss upon her pouting lips.

"I am fearful, Mr. Harley," she observed, with a fascinating smile, "that if you punish me in this manner I shall prove guilty of the oversight very often."

"Is it possible, Fanny, that you can care one fig for me after the lapse of so many years?" said the Prince, conducting her to her chair and seating himself on another near her.

"To have loved you once, Mr. Harley, is to love you for ever," answered Mrs. Brace.

"And yet you not only know that I am constantly up to my very neck in intrigues," rejoined his Royal Highness; "but you kindly lend me your invaluable aid."

"Certainly! it is my delight to make you happy," returned the lady.

"You reason like a sensible woman," said the Prince. "Besides, you yourself indulge in little love-passages occasionally. Come—confess the truth to me, Fanny. You and I are such old friends, you know—friends of fifteen or sixteen years' standing—that we need not be ashamed to give each other our confidence."

"My dear Mr. Harley, you know that I am not a saint," observed Mrs. Brace, in a subdued tone and casting down her eyes.

"I should indeed wonder if you were," exclaimed the Prince: "for you are really as handsome now as you struck me to be the first time I ever saw you. Somewhat stouter—but then I adore *embon-*

point in women," he added, his eyes gloating upon the milliner's well-developed charms.

"And it I were thin, you would found a compliment upon sylph-like elegance and delicate symmetry," said Mrs. Brace, smiling archly. "Ah! Mr. Harley—the English people may well boast of you as being the most polished gentleman in Europe."

"No—does any one say *that* of me?" demanded the Prince, his countenance lighting up with a satisfaction and a triumph which he could not conceal.

"Most assuredly," responded Mrs. Brace. "The newspapers—the Magazines—the poets—the novelists, all agree on that point."

"But don't you know, Fanny, that the public press of England is the most grovelling, debased, and despicably lickspittle towards Royalty——"

"Oh! this vituperation from *your* lips!" ejaculated the milliner, affecting to be shocked. "The press only does its duty and tells the truth when it speaks highly in favour of the heir-apparent to the throne."

"I think that last phrase of yours comes within the range of offences which I threatened to punish in a certain manner," exclaimed the Prince;—and once more he pressed his lips to those of the handsome milliner, who, to use the words of Sir Giles Overreach in the Play, "kissed close again."

"Every caress that you thus bestow is an act of treason to the lovely girl whom you are to meet presently," said Mrs. Brace, after a short pause, during which she re-adjusted the lace that fringed the bosom of her gown, the Prince having somewhat disturbed it with his intrusive hand.

"Nay—these innocent toyings only render me more anxious to embrace the charming Octavia," returned his Royal Highness. "According to the note which I received from her, she will be here punctually at seven: but I sent you word that I should call at six, because you have been so good and kind to me lately that I thought you deserved this little attention on my part. In fact, I came early on purpose to have an hour's chat with you—as I knew that you would not be busy on a Sunday evening."

"It is really very condescending on your part," observed Mrs. Brace, with another of her sweetest smiles. "But how do you manage to correspond with the young lady, since the letters do not pass through my hands?"

"They receive letters for me, addressed to *Mr. Harley*, at Long's Hotel," answered the Prince. "Octavia, believing me to be a country gentleman having a seat in some part of Kent, would have been surprised if I had not told her where I was staying—or rather pretended to be staying—in London;—and therefore I made her believe that I was residing at the fashionable hotel in Bond Street."

"I understand," said Mrs. Brace. "You have not seen her since you passed the night together in my house?"

"No: but you told me all that had occurred—how her father had returned, and how Lord Florimel had escorted her home. She herself likewise mentioned those circumstances in her letter to me yesterday. It appears that Mr. Clarendon's position has undergone a sudden and remarkable change—that his income is considerably increased—and that he is about to remove with his daughters to a handsome house in Cavendish Square. It will be all the more easy for Octavia to get away from home at times: because young ladies who have the means to go out shopping and who have friends to visit, can always invent a thousand excuses for a frequent absence of several hours. Besides, you have assured me that her sister Pauline is already engaged in a love-intrigue on her part——"

"No—not exactly an intrigue," exclaimed Mrs. Brace; "because she triumphed over the temptation of the moment, and reduced her admirer Florimel to as sickly a state of sentimentality as ever I had the misfortune to contemplate."

"And is he not recovered from that condition?" demanded the Prince.

"Far from it. I saw him yesterday—and he was devising a thousand schemes to obtain a formal introduction to the Clarendon family—so that he may visit them on a proper footing and in due time propose for the younger daughter."

"This must not be, Fanny," said his Royal Highness. "Should Lord Florimel become the husband of Pauline, a sense of honour will induce him to rescue Octavia from this intrigue:—and such a proceeding will by no means suit me. I am really desperately enamoured of this girl, and cannot part from her yet awhile. Is Florimel incurable with his sentimentality?"

"It would be at least a very difficult matter to effect such a cure," answered the milliner. "He has taken a solemn vow to abjure what he now calls his profligate life—he has sworn to forbear from all intrigue—in fine, he has resolved *to become worthy of possessing the innocent, amiable, and virtuous Pauline.* Those are his very words."

"This is nauseating in the extreme," observed the Prince, in a tone of unfeigned disgust: for the royal voluptuary could not understand the existence of such a pure and holy feeling as that which Pauline had awakened in the breast of Lord Florimel. "I am not acquainted with the young nobleman—or I might perhaps undertake the task of making him sensible of his folly in yielding to such maudlin emotions. But you, my dear Fanny——Now tell me candidly," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself;—"has anything beyond mere friendship ever yet existed between you and Lord Florimel?"

"Nothing—on my honour!" answered Mrs. Brace, emphatically.

"Then it is for you to take the young nobleman in hand, and subdue him," rejoined the Prince. "Do you comprehend me? Yes—by the blush that rises to your cheeks, I perceive that you not only understand me, but that the suggestion affords you pleasure. Promise me to do your best in this matter—as it is of the highest importance to me, in my amour with Octavia, that she should not obtain a defender—a monitor—and perhaps an avenger, in the person of a brother-in-law."

"I will do all that you have recommended," said Mrs. Brace.

The Prince was about to bestow upon her another tender caress as a reward for her ready complaisance, when the door opened and Harriet entered—or rather burst into the room—with an affrighted countenance.

"What means this intrusion?" demanded his Royal Highness, haughtily.

"O madam!" exclaimed the lady's-maid, address-

ing herself in an appealing manner to her mistress, as if beseeching her to propitiate the wrath of the Prince—for she of course knew who the feigned Mr. Harley was;—"O madam! pray pardon me—but such an ill-looking man has just called—and at the Pall Mall entrance too ——"

"An ill-looking man," repeated Mrs. Brace, becoming deadly pale even through the roseate tinge which art had so delicately shed upon her cheeks—so that this woman, handsome to a degree of splendour, grew ghastly to behold.

"Yes, madam," was the servant's rapid and excited answer. "And he says he must and will see you—as he has something particular to tell you about that robbery the other night——But, gracious goodness! he is coming this way——I hear his heavy footsteps approaching!"

"This is awkward—most awkward!" exclaimed the milliner, collecting all her courage to meet the emergency. "Your Royal Highness ——"

"Perdition! I may be known—recognised!" ejaculated the Prince, who had started from his seat at the sound of the advancing steps. "Here! this will be best!" he added;—and in another moment he was concealed behind the ample window-curtain which reached from the ceiling to the floor.

Mrs. Brace would have given worlds that the Prince should not have taken this step: but it was too late—the mischief was accomplished in the twinkling of an eye;—and scarcely had the waving of the curtain subsided, when the Magsman appeared upon the threshold of the apartment. Harriet glided past the intruder with terrified looks, and closed the door behind him; while Mrs. Brace sank back in her chair, a perfect pandemonium raging in her bosom.

Well, indeed, might the lady's-maid have described this formidable visitor as "an ill-looking man;"—for, although it was Sunday, he had not bestowed the slightest pains upon his toilette. His garments were coarse, shabby, and negligent as usual: his coal-black hair was as rough, and his whiskers were as bushy and fierce as ever;—and his eyes gleamed with a sinister expression that was habitual to them, from beneath the coarse, shaggy, overhanging brows. He kept his hat upon his head as he entered the room; and he carried in his hand a huge stick, or rather club, by means of which his powerful arm might have felled an ox at one blow.

For a few moments Mrs. Brace was overwhelmed by his presence. But suddenly a thought struck her; and, starting from her seat, she said in a low and hurried tone, "Follow me into another room—I expect company here every minute."

"Well, then—the company may wait till you and me have done the little business that has brought me here this evening," replied the Magsman. "The place looks so comfortable," he added, taking a calm and deliberate survey of the beautifully-furnished parlour, "that I prefer staying here. Besides, there's a capital fire—and the weather's deuced cold, I can tell you."

Thus speaking, the Magsman took the chair which the Prince had quitted only a few minutes previously; and Mrs. Brace resumed her seat, pushing it back however to a greater distance from the formidable ruffian who had placed himself so near her.

"What! do you think I carry a pestilence about with me?" exclaimed the Magsman, offended at this movement. "But no matter: we won't quarrel about trifles. I dare say I'm not quite so good-looking as when——"

"For heaven's sake! tell me what you require—what you want," interrupted Mrs. Brace, in a tone of feverish excitement.

"Money," responded the villain, with coarse abruptness.

"I sent you five hundred guineas the other day, according to agreement," exclaimed the wretched woman; "and it was an understanding between us that you would trouble me no more."

"Never mind the understanding," said the Magsman. "Half of the blunt went to my pal, the Big Beggarman, who was with me here t'other night—and as I've an unfortunate itch for gambling, I've lost all my share. So I thought I would just drop in this evening, to inquire after your dear health and request a farther supply."

"How much do you require?" gasped Mrs. Brace, in a faint tone—while all the anguish which this interview excited in her soul was betrayed in the workings of her countenance, hard though she struggled to conceal her emotions.

"Another five hundred will answer the purpose—at least for the present," returned the Magsman, with the tone and air of one who felt that he had the power, if not the right, to command.

"For the present!" repeated Mrs. Brace, almost starting from her seat. "Then am I to expect periodical visits from you?" she demanded, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to render firm and even defiant.

"Well—we shall see about all that, my dear," said the Magsman. "You wouldn't surely be so cruel as to refuse your own——"

"Silence!" almost shrieked the wretched woman. "The money shall be sent to you to-morrow," she added, her tone suddenly changing and sinking to a hoarse whisper. "Now you will have the kindness to leave me?"

"What! you don't so much as ask me to wash my mouth out with a drop of something short!" exclaimed the ruffian. "But I see how it is. You look upon me as a low fellow—a vulgarian—the scum of the earth,—while you're a fine lady, pranked out in silks and satins—living in a beautiful house—enjoying every comfort——"

"In the name of God! let us terminate this interview at once," interrupted the milliner, fixing a look of earnest appeal upon her terrible companion. "You can come to-morrow night yourself to fetch the money, if you choose—and then we will have some conversation together. But this evening——"

"You expect company—eh?" said the Magsman. "Well—I don't think I'm exactly in full costume," he added, surveying his ruffian-like attire with a deliberate coolness which left room to believe that he had still some doubts upon the subject. "But really you're not treating me well, my dear: for after so long a separation—it must be a matter of fifteen or sixteen years——"

"Oh! pray—pray leave me now—I beseech—I implore you!" exclaimed the milliner, her voice absolutely expressing a rending agony;—and she joined her white hands appealingly as she thus spoke.

"By jingo! this amounts to a positive insult!" growled the Magsman, not offering to budge from

his chair. "You ought to be precious glad to see me again: but instead of that, you want to get rid of me for the sake of some trumpery folks who're coming to swill tea and coffee and devour muffins. Well, I shan't force my company upon you much longer, as I see it's disagreeable. So, if you'll give me a drop of brandy, or anything short that you can lay your hand on at the moment, I'll take myself off."

The reader can imagine the horrified feelings which had raged within the bosom of the elegant milliner from the first moment of the ruffian's entrance,—the bare thought that all his detestable vulgarity and loathsome familiarity were exhibited in the hearing of *the most polished gentleman in Europe*, being quite sufficient to overwhelm and crush her. But, in addition to this, she entertained the appalling dread that he would give utterance to something which might reveal to the ears of the Prince a secret she would sooner die than have betrayed.

It was therefore with an indescribable sensation of relief that she heard him intimate his readiness to depart;—and, springing from her chair with the lightness of a hoyden nymph, she took from a cupboard a silver liqueur-stand, containing crystal decanters filled with spirits and cordials, and surrounded by beautifully cut glasses.

"You haven't got a tumbler handy—have you?" inquired the Magsman, likewise rising from his seat: "for I'm not accustomed to drink thimble-fulls at a time."

The milliner produced a large hock-glass, which the fellow filled to the brim with brandy; and, raising it to his lips, he said, with a leering look at the lady, "Your health—or rayther, my love to you, Fanny—and may you be in a better humour when I favour you with a call next time."

Mrs. Brace reseated herself—for a faintness came over her, as the man called her by her Christian name: but she shook off the oppressive sensation by the time he had finished his fiery draught, which he

poured slowly and without intermission down his throat.

"Well—that's better than the bingo at the Beggar's Staff," he observed, as he placed the glass upon the table: then, surveying the milliner in silence for a few moments, he added, "By goles! you're handsomer than you was sixteen years ago. You've filled out wonderfully, and seem as plump as a partridge. I'll just have one kiss in remembrance of old times—and then I'll be off."

"No—no!" shrieked Mrs. Brace, whose anguish had become intolerably excruciating while the ruffian was thus complimenting her. "Leave me—for God's sake! leave me——you promised you would ——"

"One kiss, I say!" exclaimed the Magsman, advancing towards her with extended arms, his club being for the moment laid on the table.

"I will die sooner!" was the lady's emphatic answer: and, losing all prudential control over herself, she darted an agonising glance towards the curtain.

"By the living jingo! I begin to suspect something now," cried the Magsman, who had not failed to notice that rapid but affrighted look. "A lover, I'll be bound!"

And he strode towards the window.

"Stop!—you dare not do it!—you know not what you are doing!" screamed Mrs. Brace, darting forward and grasping him by the arm.

"Lord bless ye! I ain't jealous——but I must have a look at him, for curiosity's sake," said the Magsman, pushing her back into her seat; and, at the same moment that a stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched woman, the curtain was drawn violently aside by the ruffian's remorseless hand.

The Prince of Wales, whose countenance was glowing with indignation, thus became revealed to the Magsman; and the fellow was struck dumb and motionless with mingled awe and astonishment—for he instantly recognised the heir-apparent to the throne.

His Royal Highness perceived in a moment that the ruffian knew who he was; and, stepping forward, he pointed imperiously towards the door, exclaiming in a stern voice, "Begone, sir—or it will be the worse for you!"

"No—I'm damned if I'm to be bullied in this way," retorted the Magsman, instantly recovering his self-possession and cool insolence. "The world says your Royal Highness is no better than you should be—and now I've had a proof of it."

For a few moments the Prince was staggered by this unexpected display of defiance: but speedily becoming alive again to the embarrassing nature of his present position, he said, "The coarseness of your allusion is only equalled by its falsity. This lady I respect—and you shall not insult her in my presence. Now, depart quietly—or you will be handed over to the keeping of a constable for endeavouring to extort money from her."

"That's a capital joke,!" exclaimed the Magsman, with a chuckling laugh. "Why—everything she's got, by right belongs to me——"

"Silence!" screamed Mrs. Brace, almost frantic.

"And what's more," added the ruffian, heedless of this interruption; "I'll bring an action against your Royal Highness for *crim. con.* with my wife!"

The milliner shrieked—and fell senseless upon the carpet.

"Miscreant!" ejaculated the Prince, unable to restrain his rage at the last threat levelled against himself: "I'll have you hanged before you're many weeks older."

"No, you won't," responded the man, with a tone and air of insolent defiance: "but you'll send me five hundred guineas to-morrow along with the same sum that my wife has promised me—and on that condition I shall say no more of this business."

Having thus dictated his terms to the heir-apparent, the Magsman grasped his club and strode out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

The noise aroused Mrs. Brace from her swoon—and his Royal Highness raised her in his arms: then, placing her on a chair, he filled a tumbler with water and made her swallow some of the refreshing beverage.

Not that the Prince cared very much for her: his pride had been terribly wounded by the idea that he had ever intrigued with the wife of such a ruffian as the one who had just quitted the apartment;—but the milliner was too useful to him in many ways and was acquainted with too many of his secrets to permit him to treat her with coolness or indifference—much less with disgust.

"Oh! is not all this a horrible dream?" murmured the wretched woman, as she slowly came to herself: but as the full tide of memory swept back to her excited brain, she raised her eyes in an imploring manner towards the Prince, saying, "What must your Royal Highness think of me now?"

"Just the same as I did before," was the prompt but insincere answer. "You cannot help the degradation into which that vile man is evidently plunged—and I pay a better compliment to your taste than to suppose that when you married him years ago he was anything like what he is at present."

"Oh! I thank you—sincerely thank you for these assurances," said Mrs. Brace, considerably relieved; —and she pressed his hand to her heaving bosom.

"To-morrow you must send him a thousand guineas—mind, a thousand guineas, Fanny," observed the heir-apparent: "that is to say, five hundred for yourself—and five hunded for me. He will then leave you tranquil, no doubt. If not, we must devise some energetic measure to send him out of the country altogether."

"Did he, then, dare to make stipulations with you?" inquired Mrs. Brace, who, it will be remembered, was in a senseless state when the Magsman *ordered* the Prince to send him the money that was to purchase his secrecy and forbearance.

"He did. But we will not dwell upon the subject," hastily observed his Royal Highness, who experienced the keenest sense of mortification at the insult which he had found himself compelled to put up with. "I will send you over a cheque for five hundred guineas in the morning—and you must not fail to remit the thousand to that man before night."

The milliner was about to make some remark, when Harriet entered the room to announce that Miss Clarendon had just arrived, and was waiting for *Mr. Harley* in the apartment to which the lady's-maid had conducted her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANOTHER MEETING.

It was not without an emotion of annoyance that Octavia Clarendon had found herself escorted by Harriet to the same room where she had met her lover on the two previous occasions, and from which the bed-chamber opened: for it shocked and pained her to think that the lady of the house and her servant must fancy that she came thither only as the mistress of Mr. Harley, and not in the quality of his destined wife. She dared not however make an observation upon the subject to Harriet: for shame sealed her lips;—but when the domestic had withdrawn, tears started to the long black lashes which shaded the lovely creature's deep blue eyes.

For a few moments she remained pensive and melancholy—more than half repenting of having of her own accord made this appointment. But when she recollected how ardently she had longed to meet her lover again, and that this desire was now on the point of being gratified, a smile played upon her red lips like a sunbeam kissing a rosebud—and she hastily wiped away the traces of her tears.

Scarcely had she thus composed herself, when the door opened—and the next instant she was clasped in the arms of her lover.

"Oh! my sweet Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, pressing her again and again to his bosom, "how truly elysian is the happiness which you have thus afforded me! Never, since we parted the last time, has your worshipped image been absent from my mind: but now the radiance of your loveliness renews the flood of intense delight which the remembrance of all that glorious beauty has poured into my soul."

"Dearest George—I also have thought of thee without ceasing," murmured Octavia, all her senses appearing to dissolve into softness beneath the melting influence of the insidious language which the melodious yet manly voice of her lover breathed in her ear.

"Yes—my angel," continued the practised and systematic deceiver, having conducted her to a seat, and placing himself by her side,—"I have not for a single moment proved unfaithful to thy sweet image. It has been my contemplation by day—and has rendered my dreams delicious at night. But when thou art not with me, it seems as if a strain of exquisite music had passed away, leaving only the faint prolongation of the dulcet sounds in the ears."

"These assurances create an ineffable joy within my heart," said the enraptured young lady, suffering the Prince, without a remonstrance, to remove her bonnet and ample shawl,—while the very soul of her impassioned love breathed upon him through the words which she uttered, and shone upon him in her heavenly looks and her sunny smiles.

"You cannot conceive the delight which your letter gave me," continued his Royal Highness, whose princely rank was so little suspected by the confiding Octavia. "It is said that Poetry wafts the soul of the bard into an elysian realm of his own creating, where thoughts and images appear as in a celestial temple full of music and incense, and whence his beatific spirit bears them back to the earth to weave them in immortal verse. But, oh! how much more truly may all this be said of Love, which wafts the soul to no ideal world, but into a heaven having a real and palpable existence, and from which there is no awaking to find it all a dream!"

"And shall you ever entertain these thoughts which infuse so much delight into my heart?" murmured Octavia, who could not possibly have understood, even if a saint had risen from the dead to proclaim the fact, that her lover experienced not a particle of the poetic sentiment which he described in such glowing terms, but that his passion was a mere gross sensuousness.

"I shall never cease to adore and worship you, my angel," he replied, straining her to his breast, and lavishing upon her the warmest caresses.

"You are aware that my father has returned—and you will now seek an early opportunity to form his acquaintance?" said Octavia, thus delicately reminding the Prince of all the pledges and vows which he had made her on previous occasions.

"When he shall have become settled in his new abode, dearest," was the specious answer, "I shall obtain an introduction to him. He now stands every chance of shortly becoming heir to the Marchmont peerage."

"Unless some favourable change should take place in respect to the Honourable Mr. Arthur Eaton, who, as I informed you in my letter, is wasting away visibly. Some frightful and unknown malady has fallen upon him," added Octavia, in a tone of deep commiseration.

"And is no cause alleged for this strange indisposition?" inquired the Prince, who was toying with his lovely mistress while thus conversing.

"My father was speaking of the matter again this morning," answered Octavia; "and it appears that some time ago the Honourable Mr. Eaton was supposed to be deeply enamoured of the orphan niece of a rich nobleman: but he suddenly discontinued his visits to her, without any obvious reason. Her noble uncle brought her with him from Derbyshire to London—and since that time the mysterious sickness has stricken the young man. Nevertheless, my father declares that it is not a mental malady—but a physical one: he is not pining away through disappointed hope and blighted affection—but is gradually perishing as if all the elements of existence were sapped and undermined."

"This is most extraordinary," said the Prince, on whose breast Octavia's head lay reclined, while from time to time he imprinted burning kisses upon her brow, her cheeks, and her lips. "But since we are thus discoursing for a moment—and observe, it shall not be for long," he added tenderly,—"upon various and comparatively indifferent matters, let me ask you something more than you have already yet told me relative to those two ladies whose travelling-chariot broke down in front of your house, the very first evening that I was so fortunate—so truly blest as to become acquainted with you. On the last two occasions that we met here, I have been going to speak to you about them: but subjects of a nearer and dearer interest so much absorbed my attention that I lost sight of the matter."

"Do you not remember that my sister and I informed you those ladies were a Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith—and that we fancied they were traveling *incognito*?" said Octavia. "But you yourself declared that they did not deceive us in respect to their names;—and yet my father shares the suspicion

which Pauline and myself originally entertained on that head."

"Ah! then your father is acquainted with the fact of their visit?" observed the Prince.

"Oh! yes—how could we keep such a circumstance concealed from him?" exclaimed Octavia. "Besides, when Mrs. Smith enjoined the strictest secrecy, she did not include my father ——"

"The strictest secrecy relative to what, Octavia?" demanded the Prince, his curiosity suddenly excited by the singularity of the observation which had just fallen from the lips of his charming mistress.

"Heavens! what have I been saying?" cried the young lady, absolutely frightened at her want of caution: but her mind had been lulled, by the melting softness of her heart's feelings, into such a dreamy bliss, that she had spoken inadvertently and without reflection.

"Is it possible that you can have a secret which you will keep from *me?*" asked the Prince, assuming a tone tenderly reproachful. "Remember, dearest—you are already my wife in the sight of heaven—and, as such, not a thought nor deed should be concealed from my knowledge. It is not thus that I would act towards you, Octavia."

"Oh! do not upbraid me, George — dearest George!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him affectionately, while the tears streamed down her cheeks. "It is not a secret regarding myself—but it may possibly involve the honour of one of those ladies ——"

"Such a secret would be safe in my keeping, sweet girl," interrupted the Prince, now experiencing a curiosity so intense and entertaining a suspicion so terrible that he was sorely troubled inwardly, although he concealed his emotions as much as possible.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the yielding Octavia: "but first assure me of your forgiveness for having hitherto maintained so much unnecessary reserve on that point."

"Forgiveness!" he repeated, smoothing down her rich and shining auburn hair with his hand: "how could I be angry with you, even for an instant?"

"Dear George, how kind you are!" she murmured, the tears on her cheeks exhaling with the warmth of the sunny smiles which now succeeded them.

"Proceed, my love," said the Prince, drawing her again towards him, so that her head once more reclined upon his breast: for he did not wish her now to contemplate his features while she spoke—inasmuch as he had a presentiment that he was about to hear something calculated to excite the acutest feelings that could possibly indicate their hidden workings by the expression of the countenance. "You said that this secret might possibly concern the honour of one of those ladies——"

"Yes—if she were not married, interrupted the artless Octavia. "But if Mrs. Mordaunt be the real name, as you said it was, of that beautiful young lady of eighteen—then must she be married, and there is no disgrace. At the same time, the mystery which was observed relative to the child——"

"The child!" repeated the Prince, scarcely able to control his feelings. "But you are speaking, my dearest Octavia, as if I were already acquainted with everything—whereas I know nothing as yet of all this."

"Pardon me for the giddy way in which I began my narrative, dear George," said the lovely girl, pressing his hand to her lips. "I should have told you at once that Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother almost immediately after she entered our house."

"A mother!" murmured the Prince, under his breath: for it was with the greatest difficulty he could now subdue the terrible emotions that were agitating in his bosom. "And what became of the child?" he demanded.

"He was placed in the care of a surgeon named Thurston, and who resides in our neighbourhood," answered Octavia.

"Then it was a boy?" exclaimed the Prince: and, scarcely pausing for an instant, he added, "I suppose the surgeon attended upon my —— Mrs. Mordaunt, I mean, in her confinement?"

"Yes. But am not I doing wrong in communicating all these facts, dearest George?" exclaimed the lovely girl: for she began to perceive that there was something singular in the manner of her companion; —and, raising her head, she gazed upon him with the sweetest expression of her splendid blue eyes. "You tell me that you are acquainted with Mrs. Mordaunt—and you will therefore doubtless meet her in the circle in which you move. Oh! do not bring a blush to her cheeks, if there be really dishonour associated with all I have now revealed to you!"

"You cannot think me so base, my charming Octavia!" said the Prince, straining her to his breast. "It is a mere matter of conversation—perhaps of curiosity on my part: but believe me when I assure you that there is no dishonour attached to Mrs. Mordaunt's name—and I can well divine the family reasons which have compelled her to observe so much mystery in respect to the birth of her child. A runaway and secret match—against the wishes of her parents—and ——"

"Oh! I can understand it now," interrupted Miss Clarendon, placing implicit credence in the specious explanation which the Prince thus volunteered. "Poor creature! she is greatly to be pitied if her parents be so cruel! So beautiful—so amiable—so elegant in her manners——"

"But were you ever to behold her, riding for instance in her carriage, you would not point her out to any one with whom you might happen to be at the time?" said the Prince.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the young lady. "Besides, all my thoughts—all my ideas—all my sentiments, are so absorbed in the love which I bear for you, that I have no leisure nor inclination to trouble myself relative to the affairs of others. But you appear to be pre-occupied, George—you are not well: or else something is troubling you?" she added, gazing upon him with the tenderest solicitude.

"Oh! I am always happy when in your society, my beloved girl," he cried, now lavishing upon her the most ardent caresses. "But tell me—how long can you remain with me this evening?—for it is paradise while you are with me—and a dreary void when you are away."

"I must return home by eleven o'clock, without fail," she answered, hiding her blushing countenance on his breast. "Seek not to detain me longer, dear George: for I could not find an excuse to account to my father for a protracted absence."

"Not for worlds would I involve you in so cruel an embarrassment!" exclaimed the Prince, glueing his mouth to her luscious lips, until her heavenly

countenance glowed with the ardour of passion and her melting blue eyes swam in the delicious languor that expressed soft desires.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE EARL AND COUNTESS OF DESBOROUGH.

THE scene now shifts to a noble mansion in Berkeley Square.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the incidents just related; and in a splendidly-furnished apartment, in the lordly dwelling alluded to, a lady was seated—or rather reclining in a negligent manner—upon a sofa drawn near the fire.

She was about twenty-eight years of age, and very handsome. Her complexion was a clear olive: but, beneath that transparent skin of delicately tinged bistre, glowed a fine carnation—the whole effect being that of softness combined with thriving health.

Her eyes were black—large—and brilliant; and, in the proud lustre of their rays, those magnificent orbs denoted the strength of the lady's intellectual powers and the energy of her character—at the same time that they bore testimony to the ardour of her temperament and the warmth of her passions.

Her hair was dark as night—soft as silk—and shining as the glossy plumage of the raven;—and it was parted above a forehead somewhat projecting, but high and spotless. Her eye-brows might have been considered too thick by any one disposed to be hypercritical; and they certainly imparted an air of masculine decision to her countenance. But then they were so well divided—so nobly arched—so admirably semicircular—and so faultlessly pencilled that they were broader in the middle than at the ends.

Her ears were small—well folded—and having a delicate tinge of red;—and nothing could exceed the beauty of the well-shaped neck—long, soft, easy, and flexibly swan-like. Her bust was of the most exquisite proportions: neither too much elevated, nor too much depressed,—and with the bosoms rising gently into moderate contours—firm and distinctly separated. She was tall in stature: her figure was slender and with softly flowing outlines unequalled for graceful symmetry;—and there was about her an air of elegance, entirely her own, and totally apart from the splendour by which she was surrounded.

She was dressed in a charming *deshabillée*. A tasteful cap set off with its snowy whiteness the raven blackness of her hair;—a pale silk wrapper, open at the breast and trimmed with the finest lace, was gathered negligently round her form, the shape of which it rather developed than concealed;—and the small, shapely feet, thrust into satin slippers, peeped forth from beneath the flowing drapery.

This lady was Eleanor, Countess of Desborough;—and her husband, the Earl, was a fine handsome man, in his fortieth year.

Nevertheless, she had not married him from love. She had been sacrificed to him on account of his enormous wealth: for he was one of the largest of those few favoured thousands who, by an atrocious system, retained in their possession the entire soil of England. Possessed of vast estates in Hertfordshire and Derbyshire, and a princely mansion in each of those counties—having likewise a perfect palatial residence in Berkeley Square—and owning entire streets in the metropolis, in addition to being an extensive fundholder, the Earl of Desborough might have been well deemed an excellent match by avaricious, selfish, and interested parents. But he had long remained unmarried, to the wonder of all his friends and the annoyance of mammas who had grown-up daughters and who marvelled when he *would* make his selection. At length, after having passed the best years of his life in "single blessedness," he was smitten with the charms of Lady Eleanor Sefton. This was about six years previously to the date at which our tale opened;—and her ladyship was at that time attached to the person of the Princess Sophia—then a young girl of only twelve. The Earl proposed to Lady Eleanor, whose affections were certainly disengaged, but who felt that she could not love him. Her parents, however — being more proud than wealthy—compelled her to accompany him to the altar;—and thus, at the age of two-and-twenty the charming brunette, full of all the ardent fires of a glowing temperament and a vigorous youthfulness, was sacrificed to a man for whom she entertained not the slightest particle of affection. Six years had passed since this union, which was unblest by offspring;—and although to the world the noble pair appeared contented and happy in their marriage-state, yet their private life seemed to tell another and far different tale. For they occupied not the same sleeping-apartment; and the domestics in their service were wont to whisper to their friends, in gossiping moods, that the Earl and Countess had never slept together since the first month of their alliance.

We should here observe, ere we resume the thread of our narrative, that the Earl of Desborough had adopted and brought up an orphan niece. This young lady was, at the period of which we are writing, in her eighteenth year; and she was as remarkable for the beauty of her person as for the masculine energy of her character—ungovernable passions—impetuous disposition—and vindictive nature. But she was not now an inmate of the mansion in Berkeley Square: neither was she at either of her uncle's country seats in Derbyshire or Hertfordshire. It was reported that the Hon. Miss Fernanda Aylmer—for that was her name—had accompanied some of her noble relative's friends on a tour in Italy;—and this story was generally believed, inasmuch as it was supposed that her mind required change of scene on account of a disappointment in love which rumour alleged her to have experienced. Whether the facts really were as currently stated, will presently appear: in the meantime, we return to the Countess of Desborough.

It was, as we observed at the opening of this chapter, about two o'clock in the afternoon;—and her ladyship was reclining in a negligent manner upon the sofa. A book, which she had been reading, lay near her: and the heading of the open pages showed that it was not one of the flimsy novels of the day—nor one of the licentious Magazines then so much in vogue,—but a work of ster-

ling merit and value, the study of which indicated the taste and mental capacity of the Countess.

She had only returned from Hertfordshire, in company with her husband, the evening before;—and, being wearied with travelling, she had risen later than usual. Thus was it that, although the hour had already arrived when visitors might be expected, she was still in her elegant *negligée*, and indeed experienced that lassitude which subdued all inclination to go through the tedious ceremony of the toilette.

The time-piece on the mantel had struck two, when the door slowly opened—and the Earl of Desborough entered the room.

We have already said that he was a fine, handsome person: we may add that his demeanour was pleasant—his conversation agreeable—and his manners affable and gracious. Even to those whom he looked upon as his inferiors, he exhibited not the pride and hauteur which usually characterise the English aristocracy: but he possessed a calm dignity, which circumstances might subdue into an air of conciliation and encouragement calculated to relieve the diffident of all awkwardness or embarrassment in his presence. In politics he was as liberal as a peer dared be in those times or as a British nobleman ever possibly could be;—and a naturally generous disposition rendered him charitable and bounteous towards those who made their sufferings known to him. Altogether, he was a man whom, to outward appearances, Eleanor might have tutored her heart to love;—and, judging in the same superficial way, such an alliance seemed fully and completely adapted to ensure her happiness.

But it was not so:—and a cold, imperceptible tremor swept over her frame the instant that the Earl appeared upon the threshold of the apartment.

"Pardon me if I intrude, Eleanor," he said, in a somewhat mournful voice, and speaking in a tone of embarrassment—not with the frank and noble confidence of a husband: "I inquired if you were alone before I ventured thus to break upon your privacy."

"Has not your lordship the *right* to visit me at your own good pleasure?" asked the Countess, in a cold tone and with a marked emphasis upon the word printed in italics.

"Oh! the *right*—wherefore do you speak to me with such bitter—painfully significant sarcasm?" exclaimed the Earl, closing the door and advancing towards her. "Do you not think, Eleanor, that my own thoughts—my own reflections are a sufficient punishment to me for having been wicked and insane enough to link you to the side of a corpse?" he added, in a tone of ineffable anguish.

"My God! talk not to me thus, my lord!" interrupted the Countess, with a shudder that was now painfully visible: and for a moment she turned deadly pale—then the warm blood rushed to her cheeks as if she were ashamed at her own conduct. "Pray sit down, Francis," she said, forcing herself to assume a milder tone, and addressing her husband by his Christian name.

"Merciful heavens! what would I give to purchase an unvaried continuation of this kindness of manner which you have just shown towards me!" he said, evidently touched to his very heart's core even by that faint scintillation of a better feeling on the part of the woman whom he worshipped—whom he loved so madly!

"And would to God that I could always exercise a sufficient control over myself, to enable me to treat you with that kindness which you seek to deserve at my hands," exclaimed Eleanor, gazing on him with a profound commiseration. "Oh! I am ungrateful—very ungrateful, Francis: I know that I am!" she continued, carried away by the sudden enthusiasm with which a sense of duty had inspired her. "You surround me with all the elements of happiness—my slightest wish is anticipated—my very path is paved with gold—and my relatives have been enriched by your bounty:—and yet I am cold—reserved—cruel towards you, Francis—and you bear it all without a murmur! Oh! forgive me, my husband—forgive me!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees at his feet, and joining her white hands imploringly: "forgive me, I say—and in future I will endeavour to prove grateful and kind, as you yourself are generous and good!"

The Earl started from the seat which he had taken, and for a few moments was so bewildered and amazed by this proceeding on the part of his wife that he knew not how to act—nor what to say. His fine, tall, manly form, of noble proportions and commanding air, was drawn up to its full height;—and his large handsome blue eyes were bent upon the beauteous woman who thus knelt before him as a weeping suppliant. For the tears were streaming down her cheeks—and her red lips, parted with the besecching expression which her countenance had assumed, revealed the faultless teeth, white as the pearls of the east. He beheld, too, the polished and exquisitively shaped arms, thrust forth from the large sleeves of the negligent wrapper,—the hands uniting insensibly with those arms as in the statue of the Venus de Medici. Yes—thus might his looks embrace the charms of his lovely wife:—but, although at length he recovered self-possession enough to raise her from her knees, he embraced her not—neither did he even offer so much as to touch her forehead with his lips.

"Say—will you pardon me, Francis?" she exclaimed, sinking back upon the sofa.

"Just heaven! it is for me to implore *your* forgiveness, Eleanor!" he said, his countenance expressing all the agony that rent his soul.

"No—it is for me!" she responded emphatically. "I have been unkind—ungenerous towards you: but, believe me, I have never failed to appreciate all that is good and great in your disposition—all that is noble and elevated in your character. Heaven knows that I have reasoned with myself so often—Oh! so often, that I wonder how I have not yet succeeded in tutoring my mind to the entertainment of other thoughts—other ideas—other sentiments towards you. But you cannot put faith in what I now tell you—you cannot understand the sincerity of my sorrow and remorse—you remember that the present scene is but a repetition of many former ones—and you look upon me as capricious, changeable, and vacillating! Yes—yes—such are your impressions, Francis—and you are justified in thinking thus of me!"

As these last words fell from the lips of the Countess, she covered her face with her hands—and the pearly tears trickled between her long taper fingers.

There was a pause—a silence in that room;—and then a sob—a half-stifled sob—came floating upon the lady's ear.

She started—raised her head—and looked rapidly towards her husband. He had reseated himself: both his elbows rested upon the table—and his hands supported his face, which they likewise concealed. He was evidently wrestling against emotions profoundly excited—but vainly wrestling: for his chest heaved convulsively—and the strong, powerful, vigorous man was weeping like a child.

Oh! not for another instant could the naturally generous-hearted Eleanor brook this moving spectacle: but, springing towards him, she tore his hands away from his countenance—she raised his head—and pressing her lips to his forehead, while the tears rained down from her long dark lashes upon his cheeks, she murmured, "Forgive me, Francis—forgive me! I am a wretch to have tortured you thus!"

"It was your kindness—your goodness which unmanned me, adorable woman!" he exclaimed, pressing her in his arms: "it was the mercy you showed towards me, that awakened all the tenderest feelings of my soul!"

He remained seated—and his beautiful wife stood by his side, leaning upon him with one arm thrown around his neck, and one hand pressing his own to her lips,—while her eyes, usually of such dazzling lustre, contemplated his handsome features with a melting softness and a mournful tenderness.

"Never again ask me to forgive you, Eleanor," said the nobleman: "for I have so much for which to implore *your* pardon! But you can form no idea of the extent of that love which I bear for you, and which rendered me so diabolically selfish as to seal your misery by making you mine. Never—never shall I forget the first time that I beheld you! An enchantment was upon me—the very atmosphere which you breathed was intoxicating—the air through which you seemed to float in the mazy dance was fraught with ravishment! My senses were enthralled—my spirit was bathed in a fount of love. I went home—and then came the terrible reflection that you never could be mine,—although the sweetest reminiscences of my life would ever be associated with your image. Like Orpheus, I could cherish the memory and in imagination look upon the shade of her whom I loved: but the deep and impassable gulf appeared to be still between us! Again I saw you—and we were introduced to each other. Then did I comprehend all that celestial passion which poets love to paint,—I felt all its mystic influence, thrilling me like an elysian essence,—and I sate like one enchanted by your side, gazing in respectful admiration upon you. You spoke—and your voice fell like soft music on my ear;—and when some one came to lead you off to the dance, it seemed to me as if a delicious melody which had enchained my senses, were passing away. Again I went home—to ponder throughout the live-long night on your image. And then I was madman enough to think and to hope that there might be such a sentiment as a love of divine nature, apart from gross enjoyment, and existing rather as an essence than a sensuousness. And I fancied that if I made you my wife—surrounded you with every element of happiness which wealth could purchase—anticipated all your slightest wishes—ministered unto you the most delicate yet unwearied attentions—converted you into the goddess of my incessant worship—elevated you as the divinity to which it would be my only joy and desire to kneel—and studied your felicity even to those minute details that embrace the veriest trifles which the most affectionate husbands are prone to overlook,—I flattered myself, I say, that if I did all this, you would appreciate my good intentions—you would become contented with your lot—and you would regard me with a generous compassion—if not with friendship! Your *love* I could not hope to gain:—and yet there were moments when the starry wings of my imagination wafted me, in delicious visions, away from this gross earth, and taught me to believe that a young, amiable, and intellectual woman, placed in the midst of the glowing feelings and gentle fascinations which my idolatry towards her was calculated to engender, would have perhaps learnt even to *love* the man who thus undertook to make her welfare and her happiness his sole and constant care."

By degrees, as the Earl of Desborough gave utterance to these sentiments in a tone plaintively touching, the Countess grew deeply—deeply interested in the language that thus conveyed such ingenuous revelations: her whole attention became absorbed in words which, though spoken with no sinister intent, but in the spirit of manly frankness and candour, had the effect of a powerful appeal to her feelings;—and when, towards the close, they assumed the air and expression of a gentle reproach and a tender upbraiding, the conviction gradually stole upon her that she was unworthy of even the notice of the man in whose mind dwelt such elevated thoughts and such chastening ideas. The tint of the rose re-appeared upon her cheeks which the former emotions had left so pale;—and that hue, deepening rapidly as the sense of shame grew stronger in her breast, flushed into a glowing crimson which overspread her countenance—her neck—her very bosom!

"Francis," she said, in a low and solemn voice, as she bent over him in such a way that he could not see her blushing cheeks, although he felt the gentle pressure of her warm arm round his neck,—"I am humiliated—ashamed—confused, to an extent which you cannot possibly understand. What can I say—what can I do to convince you that I am thus profoundly touched? You have made me comprehend all the grossness of my mortal nature:—you have forced me to regard and study my own imagination in all its impurity—my soul in all its sensuousness. And yet—though possessing an ardent temperament, and at times devoured by desires and rendered restless by fierce passions—I take the Almighty to witness that I am pure and chaste in body,—I call heaven to hear the solemn oath which I pledge to you that never, never have I proved faithless to the vows breathed by my lips at the altar."

"Hush! not a word more, Eleanor — dearest Eleanor!" cried the Earl, springing from his chair and straining her to his breast. "It were a flagrant insult towards you, were I even to thank you for an assurance on a point regarding which I was already assured. Never—no, not for a single instant—have I suspected that the rich offering of your virgin affections has been surrendered to another;—and it is the conviction of your chastity which enhances into a worship—an idolatry the love that I bear you! Oh!—yes—it is for this that I have made you the goddess of my adoration;—and when I am not in your presence, my thoughts are with you all the same. Your image is never absent from my me-

mory;—but when I think of that wilful, wicked selfishness on my part—or rather, those vain and fanciful imaginings—which prompted me to make you my *victim*, my very soul is wrung with the agony and crucifixion of remorse! Oh! my beloved—my adored Eleanor, grant me your compassion—your sympathy—your commiseration! Despise me not—suffer not your heart to loathe and abhor me; and when the sense of your own unhappiness steals irresistibly upon you—when, in gazing around, you behold wives who can be proud of their husbands and rejoice in a smiling progeny,—then curse me not in the depths of your sickening spirit,—but pause for a moment to reflect that I also am unhappy!"

The Earl had spoken to this length without interruption—for the Countess was almost suffocated by the feelings which his pathetic and touching language inspired. Her head sank upon his shoulder: he felt her bosom throbbing against his arm like the swell and reflux of a mighty tide;—and her tears rained down upon his vesture.

But this evidence of a warm and generous disposition on her part, only rendered his remorse the more poignant,—crushing his very soul as beneath the weight of centuries: for more vividly than ever was forced upon his mind the conviction that his selfishness or his sophistry had demanded and obtained the sacrifice of a lovely woman animated with all the ecstatic fires of youth, sensitive to the seductions of an ardent temperament, and yet able from a sense of duty to subdue the longings of her impassioned nature and the cravings of her glowing imagination.

Thus, while his heart cherished a very paradise of love for this adorable being, his brain was convulsed with ever-recurring paroxysms of sorrow and remorse;—and while the new-born tenderness which she now manifested towards him thrilled in transport through his veins, he shuddered because he feared lest it should have kindled suddenly only to expire rapidly.

"Francis—my good, kind husband," murmured the soft, melting voice of the Countess in his ear,—"will you not believe me when I assure you that our conversation of this day has changed me altogether?—will you not suffer yourself to hope that I can henceforth behave to you in a manner which may become at least a slight atonement for the past? I am well aware that I have made these promises before—that your language has on many, many occasions melted me into a softness which has led to similar vows and pledges. But never was the impression so deep as it is now—never did I comprehend your character so fully as I can read it at present."

"I could fall on my knees and worship you for these assurances, Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, yielding to the tide of delight on which his soul was now borne along. "Oh! then the flowers of my fancy are not dead—and the hopes which I had formed may yet be realized. You will love me as if I were a dear parent—a brother—or a friend;—and I shall continue to worship you as my goddess—as the idol of my devotion."

And, drawing her upon his breast, the Earl imprinted kisses on her brow—her cheeks—and her lips:—but those kisses were as chaste and pure as sisters bestow on each other,—gentle caresses, and not the long, ardent, and impassioned enjoyments of a love kindling with desire. Nevertheless the lady, unable to restrain the natural ardour of her temperament, and panting for other pleasures, glued her lips to his, while her bosom heaved against his chest. But, gently disengaging himself from her fervid embrace, he with difficulty subdued the profound sigh that rose from his very heart's core; while Eleanor, resuming her seat on the sofa, blushed through shame at the evidence of an indomitable sensuality into which her burning passions had betrayed her.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HONOURABLE ARTHUR EATON.

THERE was a long pause, during which the Earl and Countess struggled to subdue the various emotions which animated them;—and at length the former said, "It was relative to my unhappy niece, dear Eleanor, that I came to seek an interview with you this afternoon."

"Have you heard any unpleasant tidings concerning her?" inquired the Countess, in a tone which expressed the interest she took in the young lady alluded to.

"No: reassure yourself on that point," answered the Earl of Desborough: "and again, and again, let me thank you for the tender solicitude which you have ever manifested in her behalf."

"You love her as if she were your own child," observed Eleanor; "and when I became your wife, I adopted her as such."

"And had she followed your counsel and example, she would never have brought dishonour on herself," added the Earl, emphatically. "Oh! when I think of the necessity—the terrible necessity—which has compelled us to place the young girl in such a hateful—detestable retirement, it is enough to drive me to despair. But the intelligence which I have now to impart to you, Eleanor, is somewhat of a cheering nature."

"Delay not, then, to communicate such welcome tidings," exclaimed the Countess.

"I have this morning received a letter from the Honourable Arthur Eaton," continued the Earl. "It appears that, accompanied by his father, he arrived in town last evening; and he has written to me to implore an interview this afternoon. I have accorded his request—and in half-an-hour he will be here," added the nobleman, referring to his watch.

"But for what purpose can the unprincipled young man have solicited this interview?" asked the Countess, amazed by the intelligence.

"This letter briefly explains the motive," responded the Earl. "Feeling the very foundations of his existence breaking up, and conscious that some unknown but terrible malady is hurrying him to the tomb, he has been stricken with remorse—and he proposes to render his victim an act of justice which will at least prove his contrition and enable Fernanda to return into society without the blush of conscious shame upon her cheeks."

"This intelligence would be indeed welcome," exclaimed the Countess, "were I convinced that Fernanda possesses a disposition of a nature calculated to admit of such a compromise. For I need scarcely remind you that she is a being who can pursue no middle course: all her passions and sentiments verge into extremes. Madly has she loved Arthur Eaton once—profoundly does she hate him

now. A few months back, and she would have died to save him from even the slightest pang: but when the fatal conviction burst upon her that she was betrayed by a faithless seducer, she vowed that she would devote herself to a deadly vengeance."

"It must be for you to reason with her, Eleanor," observed the nobleman. "In a few minutes Mr. Eaton will be here—and in the evening, if you can make it convenient, you might pay a visit as privately and secretly as possible to my unhappy niece."

"Nothing shall prevent me," answered the Countess. "But you must now excuse me for a few minutes, while I make some change in my toilette—as I cannot receive Mr. Eaton in this *deshabillée*."

The lady quitted the room: and in about a quarter of an hour she returned, dressed in an elegant manner. If she were charming in her negligent attire, she was now superbly handsome in the dark velvet dress which she wore. Her hair, previously arranged in massive bands, now fell in locks of raven brightness upon her naked shoulders; and instead of the negligent morning cap, pearls as beautiful and as costly as those of Cleopatra encircled her polished brow. The exquisite grace of her form—the statuesque carriage of the arching neck and well-proportioned bust—the elegance of her movements—and the mild, though dignified expression which animated her features,—all combined to render her a being of whom an adoring husband might well be proud.

Scarcely had the Countess of Desborough resumed her seat on the sofa, when a domestic, attired in a sumptuous livery,—that disgusting trumpery which degrades the man into the menial, and which, thank God! the noble-minded Americans have cast off from amongst them,—threw open the door of the apartment, and announced the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

The only son of Lord Marchmont was, as we have

already stated, about three-and-twenty years of age. He was tall, and naturally slender—but now so thin that there was something spectral in his appearance. His hair was dark and curly: his eyes, of a corresponding hue, were large and searching—fascinating the beholder with their extraordinary brilliancy. But it was the light of fever that shone thus superhumanly in them;—and when observed in contrast with the emaciated and colourless cheeks—the thin lips, the natural richness of whose red had been subdued into a faint rose-tint—and the general appearance of sickness, attenuation, and decay which marked the unfortunate young man,—the effect produced was shocking in the extreme.

Retaining the air of youthfulness, he seemed to have entered suddenly on the term of caducity without having passed his prime, and likewise without falling into decrepitude. He still walked upright: there was not a wrinkle upon his brow—not a streak of snow on his dark and silky hair;—nor was there a speck to mar the brilliancy of his even and perfect teeth. And yet he was wasting away—gliding onward to the tomb with a rapidity that might almost be seen!

The Earl and Countess of Desborough rose and received the visitor with a reserve the coldness of which was less intense than they meant it to be: for grievous as was the wrong which he had inflicted upon Fernanda Aylmer, they could not help being touched by the change—the awful change—which had taken place in Arthur Eaton since last they saw him!

A few months ago, and he was a fine, handsome young man — vigorous in the enjoyment of that spring-time of his existence when the sanguine imagination, elate with hope, decks out the world in all its brightest hues, and fancies that Time, in its onward flight, will never fail to scatter flowers from his brow and diamonds from his wing.

But now—Oh! now—what a spectral being was that to bask in the sunshine of aristocratic grandeur—to breathe the ambrosial air of a lordly mansion—or to sit down at the banquet where the roseate floods of luxury were poured forth. Already did he seem as if about to take the one short step which separated his feet from the verge of the grave: already did he appear as if on the point of seeking a refuge in the tomb—that silent shore on which the last wave of human life flows, never to ebb again!

Mr. Eaton sank upon a chair even before he was invited to be seated—for the mere exertion of ascending from his carriage in the street to that apartment on the first-floor, had been followed by a general lassitude and weakness throughout the entire frame, so that he felt as if his back were about to break and his limbs to snap asunder beneath him.

"I know not how to find words to express my gratitude for the goodness which has prompted your lordship to grant me this interview," began the young invalid, speaking in a low and faint, but not disagreeable voice;—"and the presence of her ladyship at the same time is an additional encouragement—— But tell me of my poor wronged Fernanda," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, and speaking with some degree of excitement.

"The subject is a most painful one, Mr. Eaton," said the Earl;—"and yet, considering the object of your visit, it is necessary to enter into full particulars. Fernanda has been residing for some weeks past in the strictest retirement. Within the last three days she gave birth to a still-born child. The evidence of her shame is not therefore in existence!"

"It would be a wretched affectation on my part," observed Mr. Eaton, "were I to express any sorrow at this result. But, tell me, my lord—or you, my lady—tell me whether Fernanda will accept the tardy reparation which I propose to make her."

"I fear that it will be no easy task to persuade her to accept your hand," replied the Countess;—"and, since you have appealed to me, it would be alike wrong and foolish not to enumerate all the difficulties which are to be encountered in carrying out your design. Profound and sincere as was Fernanda's love for you,—deep and fervent as it must have been to enable you to triumph over her virtue,—it nevertheless survives no longer."

"And she hates me—she hates me!" exclaimed Arthur, a hectic tinge appearing, faint and evanescent, upon his cheeks. "Oh! yes—your ladyship need not attempt to conceal the full truth from me—for I am well acquainted with Fernanda's disposition—I can imagine every phase of her character! Ardently as she has loved—with equal bitterness can she hate:—in the same way that she would surrender her life to prove her affection—so would she make any sacrifice to wreak her revenge. You see that I understand her well;—and I know that I have wronged her—cruelly wronged her. But, as God is my judge, I loved her in the beginning as fervently as she loved me—and she became the victim to no settled scheme of seduction. My crime was not premeditated: in the ardour of an impassioned moment I became too bold, and she too weak—and her dishonour was the result. And it was not altogether because I had thus experienced the rights of a husband without having bestowed on her the title of a wife,—it was not on this account alone that I began to repent of my vows and pledges; but it was also because her imperious disposition would brook no control—because, in her changing humours, she sought to render me the victim of her caprices—and because her jealousy and suspicion knew no bounds."

The Honourable Mr. Eaton paused to gather breath: for the animation with which he spoke had exhausted him.

"I will frankly and honestly confess," he resumed at length, "that were I still in the full vigour of youthful health, I should not perhaps have sought to make amends to Fernanda for the injury I have inflicted upon her. I do not believe that we were formed for each other: the more our respective thoughts, feelings, habits, and passions were displayed and developed to each other, the greater appeared the dissimilitude between our minds—the more marked grew the unfitness of our union. But now," he continued, in a tone of deep pathos,—"now that the tide of my existence is so rapidly ebbing away, bearing on its bosom all the relics of a youthfulness so early wrecked—the shattered remnants of my affections, my hopes, and my aspirations,—now, in a word, that my footsteps are carrying me with such frightful speed to an early grave, there is scarcely merit on my part in making any sacrifice for Fernanda's sake,—whereas, on her side, it would be insane were she to refuse the honourable title of a wife. Alas! she would soon become a widow—and then, without shame, could she in due time bestow her hand on some happier object of her affections."

"It certainly is not our wish to reproach you for the past, Arthur," said the Earl of Desborough, much

affected by the young man's language—while the Countess sought not to restrain nor to conceal her tears;—"and your present conduct," added the nobleman, "deserves our commendation—yes, even our gratitude. Believe me, therefore, that nothing shall be omitted by Lady Desborough or myself—nothing left unessayed—in order to induce Fernanda to perform that which now becomes a duty."

"And if persuasion be required to move her, my lord," said Arthur, "think you that if I were to present myself to her in the retirement where she has been placed—exhibit to her the wretched, wasted being that I am—bid her gaze upon my colourless cheeks and my fire-fevered eyes,—oh! if I were to do this—and even fall upon my knees before her, demanding that pardon which a man upon his death-bed has a right to entreat and expect at the hands of even his bitterest enemy,—were I to do all this, she never could refuse to grant my prayer and suffer me to lead her to the altar."

The Countess exchanged a rapid glance with her husband, whose look conveyed an affirmative sympathetically responsive to her own thoughts; and, turning towards the Hon. Mr. Eaton, she said, "This evening at eight o'clock you shall accompany me to the place where Fernanda is residing. But as the visit must be strictly private, and it would be as inconvenient for me to go with you in your carriage as for you to occupy a seat in mine,—in a word, as this proceeding on our part must not be known to any of our dependants,—I will proceed with the Earl at seven o'clock to make a call at St. James's Palace—and at eight we will meet you, Mr. Eaton, in Pall Mall. You will have a hackney-coach in attendance; and I will then accompany you to Fernanda's present abode."

The Earl signified his approval of this project;—and Mr. Eaton took a temporary leave of the noble pair.

CHAPTER XL.

ELEANOR AND THE PRINCE.

Half-an-hour had elapsed since the departure of Lord Marchmont's afflicted son—and the Countess of Desborough was now once more alone, her husband having left her until dinner-time.

Reclining upon the sofa, Eleanor gave way to the reflections which the main incident of the afternoon had excited within her:—we allude to that singular and painful interview which she had with the Earl.

She revolved in her mind everything he had said to her: she repeated to herself, as nearly as she could recollect, all the glowing words in which he had described his love—the pathetic terms in which he had depicted his remorse—and the noble language which he had uttered in drawing a distinction between an etherial and œsthetic sentiment on the one hand, and a gross, sensual passion on the other. But her meditations brought her at length to the termination of the whole scene,—when *he* imprinted chaste kisses on her lips, and when *she* felt as if lightning circulated in her veins, so powerful were the longings of her desires.

Again did those sensations steal upon her;—and she blushed, although alone, at the sway which her ardent temperament exercised over her. She was ashamed and humiliated at the idea of being unable to wrestle against the voluptuous cravings that caused her bosom to pant, and her cheeks to glow, and her pulse to thrill. Invoking the aid of her virtue against the promptings of her nature—striving to assist the intellectual and spiritual to assert their triumph over the gross and the material—arming herself with all the pride and dignity of her sex to combat against that sex's mysterious longings,—the noble lady's very soul was rent with conflicting emotions; and the struggle irresistibly led her on into repinings against the destiny which thus made her the victim of so fierce a conflict between the spirit and the flesh.

It was at the moment when the heightened colour of her cheeks—the subdued lustre of her magnificent eyes, now swimming in a soft languor—and the rapid heavings of her bosom, gave an indescribable charm to her entire appearance, that the door of the apartment was thrown open, and the lace-bedizened domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

Composing herself as well as she was able, the Countess of Desborough advanced to meet the heir-apparent, who, after the usual compliments, handed her back to the sofa whence she had risen, and took a seat by her side.

"There is no chance, I hope, of interruption on the part of the Earl?" said the Prince: then, instantly perceiving that the observation had excited the surprise of the Countess, he hastened to add, "Because I wish to speak to your ladyship on a subject of no ordinary importance."

"The Earl will not return until six o'clock," answered Eleanor; "and it is now half-past four," she remarked, glancing at the time-piece on the mantel.

"Your ladyship is doubtless astonished at the announcement I have already made, respecting the importance of the matter which has brought me hither this afternoon," continued the Prince, scarcely knowing how to open the subject that was uppermost in his mind. "But I am sure—I feel convinced," he exclaimed, with some degree of abruptness, "that your ladyship will meet my inquiries with candour and frankness."

Had not the Countess been conscious of *one* incident which by its importance afforded a clue to the meaning of the Prince's allusion, she might have thought that his Royal Highness was about to address her in the language of love: but there was a certain excitement in his voice as well as an embarrassment in his manner that engendered in her bosom the worst fears on behalf of a lady to whom she was deeply attached.

"It is consistent with my nature and also with my duty to behave frankly towards your Royal Highness," she observed, after a few moments' reflection.

"You already divine the object of my visit!" exclaimed the Prince: then, glancing hastily around the apartment, he said in a more subdued tone, "Is it possible that our discourse may be overheard?"

"Not the slightest apprehension need be entertained on that head," was the immediate response given by the Countess.

"Your ladyship is the depositress of a secret—a terrible secret—involving the honour of one of the Royal Family of England," resumed the Prince of

Wales, fixing a searching look upon Eleanor's countenance, from which all the colour immediately fled.

"Does not your Royal Highness think that it were better to leave such a secret in the oblivion where prudence has sought to bury it?" she asked, in a low and tremulous tone: for she saw that it was useless to attempt a denial of the circumstance to which he alluded.

"Think you that I am anxious to publish my own sister's shame?" he demanded, in a voice which showed how deeply his pride was wounded and how humiliated he felt on account of the dishonour that had fallen on a relative so near to him. "No—such is not my intention: but I am desirous to learn all the circumstances connected with this most distressing incident."

"It were useless to probe those circumstances now—since all possible precautions have been adopted to cover them with an impervious veil," said the Countess of Desborough.

"And yet your ladyship perceives that, in spite of these precautions, a whisper has reached my ears, conveying to me the startling intelligence of the dishonour of my sister."

There was a mixture of irony and vexation in the tone and manner of the Prince which struck the Countess with the truth and justice of his observation. For, notwithstanding all the measures which prudence had suggested and which the command of unlimited resources had enabled her to carry into execution, her royal friend's secret *had* indeed transpired by some mysterious and at present unaccountable means.

"Let me convince you," resumed the heir-apparent, "that I am better acquainted with the outline of this unfortunate occurrence than your ladyship imagines. A carriage breaks down late one evening in the Edgeware Road—the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough take refuge in a neighbouring dwelling. The Princess adopted the name of *Mrs. Mordaunt*—the Countess of Desborough assumes that of *Mrs. Smith*."

"Is it possible that those young ladies could have discovered whom we were?" exclaimed Eleanor, her thoughts and her suspicions instantly settling upon Octavia and Pauline Clarendon: "can they have been base enough to make the circumstance a subject for vulgar scandal and detestable gossip? If this be the case, never more shall I believe that the countenance is an index of the mind: for candour, sincerity, and artlessness were stamped upon the features of those girls!"

"Blame them not—do them not so much injustice!" said the Prince of Wales. "Being altogether unacquainted with them, except by name, it is not from their lips that the whispers have reached me; and I can likewise assert, upon the same good authority whence I *did* receive the astounding and distressing intelligence, that those young ladies have religiously kept the secret of which accident rendered them the depositresses."

"The surgeon—Mr. Thurston—could *he* have betrayed the unhappy Princess?" murmured the Countess in a musing tone.

"No—Mr. Thurston merits not your blame," observed his Royal Highness. "Indeed, I am tolerably well assured that neither he nor the young ladies have ever entertained the slightest suspicion who Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith really were. I shall not tell your ladyship how I became acquainted with the circumstance which we are discussing: suffice it to say that my informant is as trustworthy as yourself——"

"Something strikes me!" ejaculated the Countess suddenly. "When the travelling-barouche broke down, a man—perhaps a gentleman—assisted the Princess's lady's-maid to alight, and then opened the door to aid us to descend. But he disappeared abruptly—and in the confusion of that moment, as well as in the excitement of the subsequent occurrences, all recollection of his evanescent presence was completely absorbed. It was that individual, then, who was your Royal Highness's informant," added Eleanor, with a marked emphasis.

"I will not deny the fact—since you have thus cleverly divined the truth," said the Prince: "but that person will never divulge the secret to another."

"And yet he could not have informed your Royal Highness of everything," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough: "because, although he might have recognised the Princess and me in the carriage, it was impossible for him to perceive the situation in which my beloved companion so unfortunately found herself."

"He remained in the neighbourhood and kept a strict watch all night long," said the Prince, determined to avert suspicion from Octavia relative to the authorship of the information he had received. "He saw the surgeon sent for—he knew that a child was born during the night—and as he was well aware that your ladyship could have no motive in concealing the birth of an infant of your own, he naturally concluded that it was my unhappy sister who——"

"Enough!" exclaimed the Countess, imperiously. "I again declare that I can discover no advantage in discussing this most painful subject. Your Royal Highness admits the secret to be safe in all quarters: let me therefore implore you not to disinter it from so desirable an oblivion. I love the Princess Sophia as if she were my own sister—I enjoy her confidence—and I have done my duty. Surely your Royal Highness has not come hither to upbraid me for the part which I enacted throughout that trying scene?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the Prince. "On the contrary, my deepest gratitude is due to your ladyship."

"In this case, your Royal Highness will grant me the boon I am about to solicit?" observed Eleanor, hastily.

"Speak!" said the heir-apparent, his eyes now dwelling with admiration upon the countenance to which excitement had brought back all the glowing hues of health and beauty.

"My prayer is that your Royal Highness will not reveal to the Princess Sophia your knowledge of her secret," answered the Countess. "Oh! she would die through shame were she even to harbour a suspicion that her weakness—or rather, her unfortunate love and its consequences—should be known to the brother of whom she stands so much in awe."

"I promise your ladyship not only this—but anything else that you may choose to ask of me and which I may have the power to perform," replied the voluptuary, assuming a significant tenderness

of tone and manner which Eleanor could not avoid noticing, but which she affected not to perceive. "There is one point, however, which you must clear up, beauteous lady," he continued, after a few moments' pause: "and we will then change the conversation, — nay, more — we will consign the topic to oblivion, at least so far as words are concerned."

"And that point?" said the Countess, interrogatively.

"The name of the individual in whose arms my sister forgot her duty and her chastity," was the prompt reply. "You will reveal that secret to me——"

"Never!" ejaculated Eleanor, in a determined tone. "Your Royal Highness must indeed entertain a despicable opinion of me, to imagine even for an instant that I should betray the illustrious Princess who has honoured me with her confidence, and whose friendship I enjoy."

And the magnificent eyes of the lady flashed forth the fires of indignation and wounded pride.

"Pardon me, lovely Countess—pardon me!" exclaimed the Prince, falling on his knees at her feet, and seizing one of her hands, which he pressed to his lips.

Eleanor was so amazed and bewildered by this sudden action on his part, that she had not presence of mind sufficient to enable her immediately to withdraw her hand; and the royal voluptuary, who never entertained a very high opinion of female virtue, pressed that fair hand all the more warmly to his lips, with the idea that it was now voluntarily abandoned to him.

For an instant living lightning seemed to circulate with thrilling transport through the veins of the lady—and an ineffable sensation of bliss seized upon her: but in another moment her virtue triumphed over the ardour of her nature—and, snatching back her hand, she exclaimed, "Your Royal Highness forgets who I am!"

The dignity of this reproach—the tone in which it was uttered—and the manner with which it was accompanied, would have covered with confusion and shame any other libertine than the Prince of Wales. But being accustomed to an almost unprecedented success amongst women, and setting little value upon the first display of resistance to his will, he was unabashed by the reproof which he now experienced.

"Never will I rise from my knees, dearest lady," he exclaimed, "until you declare that you have pardoned me for the rudeness—nay, the insult which I offered you a few minutes ago. Tell me that I am forgiven!"

"To relieve myself from the embarrassment of the present proceeding, I at once comply with the demand of your Royal Highness," said the Countess, in a cold and dignified manner. "Let the past—so far as it in any way regards the late painful subject of our discourse—be buried in complete oblivion."

"A thousand thanks for this kind proposal!" exclaimed the Prince, rising from his knees, and resuming his seat upon the sofa. "But how was it, charming lady, that you appeared to be offended by the slight compliment which I ere now paid to your beauty and your amiability?—wherefore did you withdraw your hand as if it were in the grasp of some hideous monster?"

"Rather let me inquire wherefore your Royal Highness should imagine that I could have acted otherwise than as I did?" asked the Countess, somewhat moved by the melting tone in which he spoke and by the tenderness of his manner.

"I must confess that I am utterly unworthy of any mark of favour at the hands of your ladyship," said the Prince. "A being so radiant in beauty as yourself—enjoying a reputation which is like the spotless mirror whence the breath breathed on its pure surface passes rapidly away—endowed with an intellect as bright as your virtues are estimable,—such a being, I say, is so far above a poor miserable mortal like myself——"

"Surely your Royal Highness must be delivering a satire against me?" exclaimed the Countess, scarcely knowing whether to be offended or to laugh, as this panegyric on herself, involving such an absurd contrast, was poured upon her ears.

"I never was more in earnest in my life!" cried the Prince, in an impassioned tone. "I have observed you at the Court—I have seen your lovely form moving in the mazes of the dance—and I now behold you by the domestic hearth;—and you appear more beauteous in my eyes, in that comparatively simple dress than when the diamonds on your brow glisten amidst the blazing lamps of fashion's busy scene. Think not that I am paying you an idle compliment—fancy not that I am offering up to you the incense of a passing flattery. No—on my soul, sweet Countess, I could again fall at your feet—I could worship you—only that I fear you would repulse my adoration with scorn and overwhelm me with reproaches."

"And you dare not venture to encounter this terrible wrath?" said the Countess, smiling, while the warm blood rushed to her cheeks—for all the fires of her ardent nature were kindled rapidly by the burning and impassioned looks which the Prince fixed upon her.

"Ah! then you could not be cruel towards me!" he exclaimed, devouring with those looks the charms which shone so resplendently in the mellowed lustre shed by the lamp on the table and the wax-candles on the mantel: for lights were already burning in the room when his visit was announced.

"Believe me, your Royal Highness, that I am taking all you say as a series of very pretty compliments, for which, as in duty bound, I tender you my most grateful thanks," said Eleanor, resolved to wrestle against the ardour of those passions which were exercising so powerful an influence over her; and therefore, in pursuance of this determination, she affected not to perceive the real drift of the Prince's language.

"Oh! wherefore do you treat as a jest that which is so solemnly serious?" demanded the heir-apparent: and, placing his hand upon his heart, he exclaimed in a tone of enthusiasm, "By heaven! divine creature, I love you—and if you scorn this avowal of my passion, you will plunge me into despair!"

Thus speaking, he threw his arms round Eleanor's form and clasped her in a fervent embrace ere she could even recover from the surprise into which this sudden proceeding threw her;—and in an instant his lips were pressed to her's—and the licentious transports which animated him were transfused, warm and impassioned, throughout her entire being. For a few moments she yielded to the profound sense of enjoy-

ment that thus seized upon her—she allowed herself to be carried away on the flood of ecstatic feelings which engulfed her soul; and though she gave not back again that burning kiss, she nevertheless withdrew not the mouth to which it seemed to grow.

But when the Prince, encouraged by this apparent abandonment of her person to him, sought to snatch farther favours, she violently disengaged herself from his arms—and, hurriedly arranging the bosom of her dress, which his daring hand had disturbed, she exclaimed, "Think not that you obtained the least particle of permanent advantage over me. Amazement—confusion—bewilderment rendered me weak for a moment: but your Royal Highness must not again venture to treat me with insult."

And, having thus spoken, she rang the bell.

"In the name of God! what do you mean, lovely Countess?" demanded the Prince, almost astounded by this proceeding, and likewise starting up from the sofa.

"Compose yourself," said Eleanor, with a calm and noble dignity: then, as the door opened and a domestic appeared, she exclaimed, "His Royal Highness desires that his carriage may immediately be drawn up to the door."

"His Royal Highness's carriage is in attendance, my lady," responded the lacquey.

"You shall yet be mine, haughty beauty—I swear it!" whispered the Prince hurriedly, as he affected to bow in a ceremonious manner ere he took his departure.

"I thank your Royal Highness for the honour of this visit," said the Countess aloud—so that the servant who held the door open observed not that anything unusual was taking place.

The Prince darted upon Eleanor a look of mingled licentiousness and menace, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

CAROLINE AND THE YOUNG LADY.

We must now return to the abode of Mrs. Lindley in Fore Street, Lambeth.

Three days had passed since that terrible night on which Caroline Walters had contemplated the horrors of the store-room, and had heard the small shrill shriek of the new-born child whom the old harridan had so ruthlessly consigned to the dark depths of the turbid Thames.

It will be recollected that she had already cherished a sentiment of vengeance against the man who had seduced and betrayed her—and that she afterwards united with that resolve a vow to seek some means of punishing the old midwife who had enacted the principal part in the appalling tragedy of that dreadful night.

During the three days which had elapsed since then, Caroline had pondered—deeply pondered—on those resolutions; and the more she meditated upon them, the more were they strengthened in her bosom. But she was at present powerless: and many weeks must probably elapse ere she would be again free and in a condition to enter upon the execution of her designs. Nor as yet had those designs assumed any settled shape in her imagination: she nursed them—she clung to them;—but she must trust to accident to point out the way to carry them into effect.

At all events, for the time being it was necessary for her to maintain a calm, placid, and even contented demeanour in the presence of Mrs. Lindley and the young ladies who were her fellow-lodgers in the accursed establishment: for she, poor girl, was so utterly friendless that she was compelled to submit to all the arrangements which Mrs. Brace had made for her;—and, being in the way to become a mother, she naturally clung to the asylum, though vile and abhorrent it were, which had been provided for her against the time when the hour of suffering and the pangs of maternity should overtake her. But she nevertheless vowed within herself that if the child which was then moving in her bosom should be born alive, it should escape the murderous intentions which Mrs. Lindley doubtless had in store with regard to it.

The clock at Lambeth Palace had proclaimed the hour of six in the evening, and Caroline Walters was in conversation with her fellow-lodgers in the sitting-room allotted to them generally, when an old nurse entered and summoned her to the presence of the midwife.

Caroline repaired to the parlour where Mrs. Lindley was seated; but she shuddered when the reptile-like gaze of that woman was fixed upon her—for never since the night of horrors had she met that look without experiencing a cold sensation as if the hand of a corpse were passing slowly over her naked flesh.

"Shut the door, my dear child," said Mrs. Lindley, speaking in that subdued tone which had become habitual to her. "Hush! not so violently—remember there's an invalid up-stairs. And now sit down for a few moments: I wish to speak to you particularly."

Caroline took a chair, and awaited in silence the communication that was to follow.

"My dear girl," resumed Mrs. Lindley, caressing her great black cat, but still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on Miss Walters,—"I have selected you from amongst the rest to undertake an office which may afford a little variety and change for you. You are aware that in the next chamber to yours a young lady has very recently become a mother. Fortunately for her, poor thing! the child was born dead——But what is the matter with you, my love?" suddenly exclaimed the midwife. "You appear to be unwell?"

"No, ma'am—it is nothing," hastily responded Caroline, who had been unable to subdue a shudder which was this time fully perceptible: for her whole frame had become convulsed on hearing the dreadful woman give utterance to so calm and deliberate a falsehood respecting the young lady's child. "It is nothing, I can assure you," repeated Miss Walters, fearful of exciting a suspicion that *she* knew the real truth regarding that murdered infant. "But what you were saying made me think that *my* time is rapidly approaching——"

"Hush!" murmured the midwife, placing her long lean finger to her thin pale lip, and contracting her thick and prominent eye-brows: "the very walls have ears, as I am constantly telling you all! But you must not give way to nervous apprehensions, my love: you must keep up your courage—and you will pass through the ordeal in safety. Recollect that I yield the palm of skill and success in midwifery to no living practitioner, male or female; and therefore it is fortunate for you that our dear kind friend, the excellent Mrs. Brace, has entrusted you

to my care. However—let us return to what I was just now saying. We were speaking of the young lady who occupies the next chamber to yours. That young lady, as you have already been informed, is of high birth—and her name must continue to be veiled in the deepest mystery. She requires a companion—some one who will consent to pass a few hours with her each day, and who will neither seek to draw from her who she is, nor recognise her again should they ever meet hereafter in the great and busy world without. Poor creature! she feels sad and lonely—for the nurse is certainly no fitting associate; and I have so many things to attend to, that I can give her but little of my company. Under all these circumstances I have determined to select you as the most genteel—most amiable—and most discreet of the young females from whom such a choice could be made."

"I shall cheerfully undertake the duty of rendering the time as agreeable as possible to the lady," said Caroline, both flattered and pleased at having been thus marked out for the task.

"You may, then, at once ascend to her chamber, my dear," returned Mrs. Lindley. "But, hark!—not a word to the others—or they will be jealous; and they will likewise overwhelm you with impertinent questions whenever they see you. Let them believe that your habits have grown more retired, and that you love to seek the solitude of your own room. By producing this impression upon them, you may easily pass a few hours every day with the young lady, and not be observed by the rest. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, ma'am," answered Caroline;—and she then withdrew from the midwife's parlour.

In the room to which the girl now ascended, a beauteous creature occupied a bed tastefully fitted up and of a more luxurious character than those in the other dormitories.

The young lady was about eighteen. Her eyes were not particularly large, and of the deepest violet blue, shaded by long jetty lashes, and capable of undergoing every variety of expression. When stormy and soul-piercing, they appeared to be black as night and burning with an overwhelming lustre;—and if eyes could slay, those were the orbs which might have had the power to shoot forth the fiery arrows of death. But when beaming with love, and melting and tender, these eyes were of a purple hue so exquisitely soft that it seemed as if they could never assume a look of wildness and fierceness — never menace with their vengeful glances, nor sear with their lightning brilliancy.

Her hair was of a dark brown—of such glossy richness that it seemed of a fainter and more golden hue where the light rested upon it, and black where the shade remained. Her skin was of the purest—most snowy white, save where veined with the pale sapphire's tint: for the gentle hue of the rose which sate upon her cheeks when she was in health, had now fled—and yet her pallor was not ghastly nor corpse-like—no, nor even sickly, though produced by indisposition;—neither was it insipid—but it was interesting. And in strong contrast therewith was the perfectly scarlet richness of her lips, which denoted the warmth of her temperament and the ardour of her nature. The proudly rising throat, sloping shoulders, and well-developed contours of the bust were in harmony with a very slender waist and finely proportioned limbs: for though she was not above the middle stature of her sex, her symmetry was admirable.

Such was the young lady in whose presence Caroline Walters now found herself: and for a few instants she stood gazing upon her in mingled admiration and respect.

"Come near me—give me your hand," said the fair patrician, in a winning tone which immediately placed the young woman at her ease; and, advancing to the bed, she took the proffered hand which she pressed cordially as if to imply a hope that they should agree well together. "Yes—we will be friends," added the lady, either divining what passed in the other's mind, or else struck by the same sentiment. "*Your* name is Caroline Walters: Mrs. Lindley told me that she should select you to be my companion. At present you must not seek to know who *I* am: but if I continue to like you as well as I do now under the influence of a first impression, I will make you my confidant—I will keep no secrets from you."

Caroline was moved almost to tears by the amiable softness which characterised the patrician's tone, looks, and manner as she thus spoke;—and while the young woman gazed on that heavenly countenance, she could not conceive it possible that one so winning, so fascinating, and so tender could have connived at the foul tragedy which had been enacted on the night of whirlwind and of tempest.

Nevertheless, this was a point upon which Caroline had resolved to satisfy herself so soon as an opportunity should occur.

"Sit down by my side, my dear friend—for so I shall call you," resumed the lady, sinking back on the pillow whence she had raised herself on Caroline's entrance. "Let us endeavour to console each other. You have doubtless been deceived and betrayed by a villain, as I have been: you have perhaps loved as I have loved——"

"Oh! yes—my love was a worship—an idolatry!" exclaimed Caroline. "And now, nothing remains for me but——"

"Despair or vengeance!" murmured the patrician, in a tone so altered—so changed from that in which she had previously spoken, that Miss Walters started up in affright; for it struck her at the instant that some other voice had breathed those terrible words in the room.

"Yes—despair or vengeance," echoed Caroline, the moment she recovered her self-possession. "But it shall not be *the former*," she added gloomily: then, fearing that she had said too much, the young woman hastened to observe, "I was however wrong to evince such a feeling, which can only tend to make you detest me——"

"Detest you!" ejaculated the patrician, starting up in her couch, a wild light suddenly flashing in her eyes: "I should despise and hate you, were you calmly and resignedly to endure the wrongs which you may have suffered at the hands of a man! Love is the religion of the heart, Caroline," she continued, in an impressive tone: "it will either elevate those who cherish it, to the condition of saints—or it will hurl them, like fallen angels, into that abyss where rage the flames of vengeance and remorse. *We* are the fallen angels, Caroline—and like fiends should we war against those who have plunged us into the hell of our outraged feelings, our blighted affections, and our ruined hopes!"

The transition of the lady's manner from the most amiable softness and winning gentleness to violence and bitterness was so rapid, and accompanied by such a change in the entire expression of her countenance, that Caroline for a moment shrank back in dismay and averted her looks: but the next instant a species of horrible fascination which she could not resist made her glance towards the invalid again—and then her eyes were rivetted, spell-bound, upon the features which were so touching in the repose of the soul, and so terrible in the bosom's storm and tempest.

"Caroline—my friend," continued the lady, in a voice of such keen bitterness and withering acrimony that it seemed as if a demoness spoke within her; "my heart is at times the prey to fiends who infuse into my veins a horrible madness! Oh! for the rage—the fury—the havoc of conflict, look not into history's pages in search of sanguinary fights—seek not descriptions of bloody battles and the murderous storming of cities and sack of towns: but down, deep into the human heart must your eyes plunge—and there, in the profundities of that mortal pandemonium, will you behold a more tremendous spectacle of strife—and war—and horror—and devastation! Such at least is my heart at times, when I ponder on all my wrongs: such is it at this moment!"

And although the lady sank back, through sheer exhaustion, on her pillow—yet the terrible workings of her countenance—the fire flashing from her eyes—the quivering of her lips—the convulsive heavings of her bosom—and the spasmodic tremor that perceptibly agitated her very limbs beneath the bedclothes, bore appalling evidence to the truth of the words which had last fallen from her tongue. Yes—such indeed, as she had described it, was the state of her heart at that moment;—and, in spite of all the vindictive fire which Caroline's Spanish blood circulated through her veins, yet was she horrified and amazed at the spectacle which that patrician now presented to her view.

But the paroxysm of fiend-like fury and demoniac wildness which had thus convulsed the lady, gradually subsided—until she at length regained her former calmness of manner and sweet placidity of countenance.

"I have alarmed and horrified you, Caroline," she observed, in the most melting cadence of her musical voice: "but you will forgive me—for I am a terrible creature when my passions are aroused. I know no middle state of temperament. Tranquil as the lake when not a breeze ruffles its bosom—or furious as the roaring, raging ocean, when lashed into black and mountainous billows: *that* is my character! I can love with a devotion so complete that the rack or the scaffold would only raise smiles to my lips, were the penalty to be endured in order to save from injury a single hair of the adored one's head: but I can, on the other hand, hate with so refined an intensity that I would sell my soul to Satan in order to ensure the gratification of my vengeance."

"You teach me a lesson, lady, which I ought to have learnt of my own accord," said Caroline, catching, as if by mesmeric influence, the spirit which animated the extraordinary young creature whose lips could tutor themselves to give utterance to such strong epithets and such terse and vigorous language. "I also have dreamt of vengeance, lady—I also have terrible wrongs to goad me on to the fury of a remorseless fiend. But I never thought of a vengeance so deadly—so unrelenting—so complete, as that which you appear to cherish. Oh! I rejoice that I have thus been thrown in your way: for, at a humble distance, my nature resembles your own. Too meek—too humble—too enduring—and too fond, on the one hand, all that I need on the other is a glorious example to set the energies of my soul—my Spanish soul—into an appalling conflagration."

"Let your meekness turn to pride, as the rivulet that flows on in smiles hardens into stern and impenetrable ice," exclaimed the patrician, the brilliant fire again lighting up in her eyes, and the hectic flush of excitement mantling on her damask cheeks. "It were folly—madness—grovelling absurdity, to allow the tender reminiscences of the past to paralyse you for the present, or disarm you for the future. The more softly and sweetly gushed the current of your young heart's bright affections—the darker, and blacker, and stormier should roll the eddies of that ruined heart's direst hate and insatiable vengeance. Listen, Caroline," continued the lady, her tone suddenly assuming the seriousness of profound pathos: "I have loved as never woman loved before—I worshipped the very ground upon which *he* trod. To breathe the same air with him was a luxury ineffable—to behold his eyes beaming upon me with the rapture of passion, was a bliss indescribable. I gave him the rich gift of a heart that had never loved before—a heart fraught with the most fervent affections, and not palled by the pleasures and dissipation of this world. And how has he rewarded me?"

"Such was my case—and the reward which I have reaped is the same that you have experienced," said Caroline. "Oh! show me the way to be avenged, dear lady—and I will bless the hour that brought us thus together."

"My vengeance is already progressing—and it is terrible!" murmured the patrician, in a low but hoarse whisper, while a sombre shade spread itself over her features. "He suspects not that my revenge is thus slowly, mysteriously, but surely overtaking him: but, when I come to know you better, Caroline, my secret shall be revealed to you—and the same means which I am now employing, may become equally effective in your hands. First, however, I must assure myself that your disposition resembles mine—and that this enthusiasm which you have now shown is the natural result of an energetic soul, and not an evanescent feeling sympathetically aroused by the words that have fallen from my lips."

"Believe me, dear lady, I shall study to deserve your confidence," answered Caroline. "But, hark!" she exclaimed abruptly, as she placed her finger upon her lip;—"footsteps ascend the stairs—it is Mrs. Lindley who is approaching."

The patrician sank back upon her pillow and instantly composed her countenance. Miss Walters reseated herself;—and thus, when the midwife entered the room, nothing betrayed to her searching glance the terrible nature of the discourse which the two vindictive young women had held together.

"Caroline," said Mrs. Lindley, "you may now rejoin your companions. To-morrow you can again visit your new acquaintance, provided that your society be agreeable."

"Oh! yes," exclaimed the invalid: "she is an amiable girl—and I already love her. The more of her company that she can devote to me, the

better I shall be pleased. Good evening, Caroline —kiss me."

And as Miss Walters embraced the patrician, a rapid glance of intelligence passed between them —a silent vow to observe the strictest and most solemn secrecy with regard to the confidence which they had already exchanged.

When Caroline had quitted the room, Mrs. Lindley, having listened until her retreating footsteps along the passage were no longer audible, approached the bed, and observed in a mysterious whisper, "The Countess of Desborough is below, and desires to see you. She has a communication of importance to make."

"Let her come up, my good friend," returned the patrician.

"But I have something else to tell you," continued the midwife;—"and I beg and implore that you will not excite yourself."

"Proceed. I am calm—and shall remain so," was the cool and collected response.

"A young gentleman is with her ladyship——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the invalid, a fearful gloom overspreading her countenance.

"Now, in the name of heaven! be tranquillised," said Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "The Countess gave me the strictest injunctions not to tell you that any one was with her: but this command I could not obey—for a single glance at that young man convinced me that *he*——"

"Yes—yes; I understand you," hastily interrupted the lady. "But, tell me, my good friend—is he in the desperate state which has been represented to us?—has my vengeance——"

"Hush!—for God's sake, hush!" said the midwife, in a hoarse whisper. "The very walls have ears! You must not appear to know that *he* is in the house, until the Countess chooses to communicate the fact. For that he has come hither to obtain an interview with you, through your aunt's intercession, is very evident. And now, dear young lady, should his grief—his penitence—his tears

move your heart, you will not reveal to him that dreadful secret which——"

"Do you consider me to be so weak—so insane?" demanded the patrician.

"Hush!—I have a better opinion of you," returned Mrs. Lindley, who nevertheless trembled all over. "But pray forgive me for reminding you that a single suspicion engendered in the breast of that young man, may cost both you and me our very lives!" she added in a tone scarcely audible, but with a terrible emphasis.

"Scatter all apprehensions to the winds," answered the invalid. "You know that my resolution is indomitable—that my heart is of steel——"

"Otherwise I should never have been induced to assist you as I have done," observed the midwife. "And now compose yourself, dear lady—for in a few minutes the Countess will be in your presence."

"It is for you to tranquillise yourself, my good friend," was the response, accompanied by a reassuring smile: "for your lips quiver—and you seem to be in a nervous tremor."

"Now that I am certain you will behave with prudence," added Mrs. Lindley, "I shall appear both firm and collected. But, remember," she whispered, as she stooped down until her lips touched the lady's ear,—"remember that the child was still-born—and that it was buried the next day in Lambeth churchyard, no funeral service being necessary."

"I understand you. And now leave me—or they will wonder at your protracted absence."

Mrs. Lindley accordingly quitted the chamber, to which the Countess of Desborough ascended almost immediately afterwards.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE BOOK-CASE.—FERNANDA AND ARTHUR.

The Hon. Mr. Eaton remained in the parlour downstairs with the midwife, while Lady Desborough undertook to prepare the way for an interview between himself and Fernanda Aylmer—for the reader has doubtless already seen that the Earl's niece and the young patrician lodger in Mrs. Lindley's establishment are one and the same person.

The midwife seated herself beside the fire—caressed her great cat—and then threw a furtive glance upon Arthur Eaton;—and an icy chill shot to her heart when she observed his eyes fixed upon her as if to read what was passing in her mind. But this was only imagination on her part—the effect of a guilty soul: for the young gentleman was merely indulging a listless curiosity when he thus surveyed the forbidding countenance of the old harridan to whose care Fernanda had been consigned by her noble uncle.

"The child was still-born, Mrs. Lindley—eh?" he said at length, by way of saying something.

"Yes, sir—and no one can regret it, under all circumstances," responded the midwife.

"Did *she* suffer much?" was Eaton's next inquiry.

"Hush! not so loud—walls have ears!" whispered the midwife, placing her finger upon her thin lip as she gave utterance to her favourite axiom. "Yes—she suffered a great deal, sir: it was night-time when it took place—and the wind was roaring dreadfully It drowned her screams effectually."

Mr. Eaton shuddered, he scarcely knew why; and a long silence followed.

"How was it that the Earl became acquainted with your establishment?" inquired Mr. Eaton, again breaking a silence which had something awful in it: for he felt growing upon him the superstitious but irresistible idea that he was in the presence of some old witch intimately acquainted with the dread and forbidden secrets of nature.

"I never reveal matters of that kind, sir," answered Mrs. Lindley, laconically. "The large amount of patronage I receive has been obtained through the confidence which may be placed in me."

"I beg your pardon for putting an impertinent question," said the Hon. Mr. Eaton. "I ought to have known better."

"There's no offence, sir—but I am sure you will be more pleased with my prudence for not gossiping," returned Mrs. Lindley, attempting to smile—which was rather difficult, at least to do it blandly, with such a countenance as the one that she possessed.

There was another long pause; and in about ten minutes a servant entered and whispered in the old woman's ear that one of the young ladies had been taken suddenly unwell and was obliged to retire to her chamber. Mrs. Lindley apologised to Mr. Eaton for leaving him, and quitted the parlour.

The young gentleman, finding himself alone, began to think that the interview between the Countess of Desborough and Fernanda Aylmer was unnecessarily long;—and a feeling of uneasiness, for which he could scarcely account, stole over him as he cast his eyes round the sombre-looking room, whose gloomy aspect was rather shadowed forth than relieved by the dimly burning candles and the flickering light of the fire.

Rising from his seat, he examined the portraits of eminent physicians suspended to the walls; and his tour round the little parlour brought him to the antique book-case, on the shelves of which were the mouldy volumes treating of midwifery and the uses of herbs, and the huge Bible fastened with silver clasps.

This book-case had glass doors, which the old woman was accustomed to keep carefully secured. but on the present occasion it happened that she had left the key in the lock. The fact was that she had been studying one of the books when the Countess of Desborough and Mr. Eaton arrived; and in her haste to greet the visitors, she had forgotten her usual caution—thus merely turning the key without taking it from the lock.

Mr. Eaton, fancying that there could be no harm in examining the contents of the books, took one down from the shelf in order to while away the time until the Countess should rejoin him: but as he opened the volume a piece of paper fell from between its leaves. He picked it up; and, glancing over it was struck by the words which were written on the top.

These words were—"The Heir's Friend."

Taking it nearer to the light of the candles, Mr Eaton had the curiosity to examine the contents of this document; and he found it to be a receipt for some purpose or another, but for what he entertained no idea. He opened the book again in order to place it between the leaves;—when his eyes fell upon are other paper, also held loose in the volume and evidently put there for safety.

This second scrap of writing he examined; and found it to be another receipt, on the top of which appeared these words—"THE ANTIDOTE TO THE HEIR'S FRIEND."

"Antidote!" he murmured to himself, while a cold shudder passed over his thin and wasted frame, as if a hyperborean wind had suddenly swept round him fresh from the icy coast of far-off Labrador: "that terrible word is ever associated, in a negative sense, with *poison!* This, then, must be the bane," he thought within himself, as he glanced at the first paper which he had seen: "and this is its antidote," he added, bending his eyes upon the second. "Oh! is it possible that the old hag whose very appearance froze the blood in my veins and filled me with vague and indescribable sensations of horror—is it possible that she can practise other and darker acts than those of midwifery?"

Then, obeying an irresistible feeling of curiosity, he seated himself at the table, and, by the aid of a silver pencil-case which he had about him, proceeded to copy on the back of a letter the two receipts that seemed to be invested with so sinister and mysterious an interest. All this was the work of a few minutes; —and having yielded to the sudden impulse that thus prompted him to adopt the means of instituting future inquiries into the nature of the receipts, he replaced them in the volume, which he restored to the shelf.

Having closed the book-case, he returned to his seat: but scarcely had he regained his chair, when the midwife came back to the room.

As she entered, her eye caught sight of the key in the lock of the book-case; and Arthur Eaton observed that she started as with a slight tremor. At the same instant she darted a rapid and searching glance upon him—for her avocations, both ostensible and secret, naturally made her suspicious: and knowing that she had committed an oversight in leaving the key in the lock, her guilty conscience momentarily made her shudder lest her visitor should have pryed into the secrets of that book-case.

But the calmness which he had assumed sate with so natural an air upon his pale countenance, that she was instantly reassured;—and, taking out the key, she returned to her seat.

The change in her manner however struck Mr. Eaton;—and he felt more convinced than ever that something awfully mysterious was associated with the receipts which he had just found in the old volume.

Soon after the return of Mrs. Lindley to the parlour, the Countess of Desborough made her appearance. The midwife then withdrew again, in order to allow the noble lady an opportunity of conversing unrestrainedly with the Hon. Mr. Eaton.

"Fernanda will see you," said Eleanor, the moment the door had closed behind Mrs. Lindley. "But I warn you that it will prove a difficult task to persuade her to accept the reparation which you have proposed to make her. My interview with her has lasted an hour," added the Countess, referring to her watch:—"and you may therefore judge that much argument has already been used, and many objections encountered on my side."

"Am I to see her alone?" asked Mr. Eaton, in a subdued and tremulous tone—for he dreaded the meeting, although he himself had courted it in the first instance.

"Yes—alone," returned the Countess. "Follow me: I will conduct you to the door of Fernanda's chamber."

They accordingly ascended the stairs—and in less than a minute Arthur Eaton found himself in the presence of the wronged Fernanda.

She was seated up in the bed, supported by pillows, and with a large shawl thrown loosely over her shoulders.

An unnatural fire shone in her eyes, and the scarlet of her lips was perfectly brilliant—these indications of strong inward emotions contrasting strangely with the pallor of her countenance. One white hand lay beneath her head, the fingers clutching the dark brown tresses, as if by that action she held back the feelings which struggled in her bosom for a vent; while the other hand, cast upon the outside of the coverlid, trembled nervously—or rather convulsively. The undulated swelling and sinking of the throat and the rapid heaving of the bosom were additional signs of the tempest that was warring in her heart.

Eaton, who knew her well, saw that she was far from tranquil, but that she was labouring to assume a composure the efforts to force which did her harm. Enfeebled and attenuated as he was, the spectacle made him tremble throughout his entire being: and uninvited he sank upon a chair placed near the couch.

"At length we meet again, Fernanda," he murmured, in a suffocating voice.

"Yes—at length we meet again," she repeated, in a low and even hoarse tone, so different from those melodious accents which had once filled his ears with delight and infused joy and happiness into his very soul. "But how and where do we meet, Arthur?" she demanded, fixing her eyes upon him. "Oh! cast your looks around this room and tell me whether it be such an one as that to which I have been accustomed! Think of the situation of this house—in an obscure street belonging to a vile neighhood,—a street and a district unknown to me until I came hither! Think, too, of the nature of this house —an asylum for the victims of man's deceit or of their own depravity! And have you seen the woman who keeps this house?—is she not a fitting genius to preside over so abominable a den? Who, then, is the cause of my consignment to such a place and to the care of such a hag?"

Eaton could not reply: he was alarmed by the gathering vehemence with which she spoke, and by the increasing brilliancy of those eyes which appeared to shed flames upon him.

"What! you cannot answer me?" resumed Fernanda, bitterly. "Oh! wherefore have you come hither? Is it to gloat over me in my misfortune?—is it to feast your eyes upon my unhappiness?—is it to avenge yourself for any harsh word that may ever have escaped my lips in those days when you taught me to believe that you loved me?—is it to punish me for any whim or caprice of which I might have thoughtlessly made you the victim, but for which I was always wont to demand your pardon with tears streaming down my cheeks? If these be the objects for which you have sought me in my wretched retreat, they are fully gained: for it is indeed the once lovely, courted, and brilliant Fernanda Aylmer whom you find beneath this detestable roof!"

"My God! you will drive me mad!" exclaimed Eaton. "Have you no compassion upon me—no mercy?" he demanded, his soul cruelly rent by her unjust observations, which were nevertheless so keen

and cutting. "Look at me, Fernanda—gaze intently upon me—see to what I am reduced! An unknown and terrible malady has seized upon me,—I am dying by inches,—I have not a year's—no, nor six months' life in me,—and I am come to offer you the only reparation which it is in my power to propose. But surely the Countess of Desborough has already explained this much to you?"

"She has told me that you would now become my husband—and she has urged me to accept the offer," answered Fernanda, who did not require to be told to contemplate the wreck to which the young man was reduced: for from the first moment that he entered the room she had secretly gloated over that human ruin! "The Countess of Desborough," continued Fernanda, "used every possible argument which her generous nature could suggest or her brilliant intellect devise, in order to induce me to accept this proposal which you have made so tardily—so very tardily. I was inexorable: but she implored me to see you. At first I refused—until it struck me that I should like to gaze upon your altered appearance and assure myself that the information I had received concerning you was correct."

"Then is it possible that you rejoice in this frightful malady which has seized upon me and which baffles the art of the first physicians of the day?" exclaimed Eaton, horror and dismay depicted upon his countenance.

"Would you learn the truth?" asked Fernanda, bending upon him a look so full of fiend-like hatred that it enhanced ten thousand-fold the exquisite tortures which his mind was already enduring.

"No—no!" he ejaculated, starting wildly from his seat. "I will hurry away from your presence—I never ought to have ventured hither! You loathe—hate—and abhor me;—and I am frightened by your looks—horrified by your manner! Farewell, Fernanda—farewell!"

And he hastened towards the door of the chamber.

"Stay!" she exclaimed, in a tone so thrilling and penetrating that it seemed to pierce through his ears and his brain down into his very heart.

He stopped short, as if transfixed: then, staggering back, he sank into the seat which he had just quitted.

"You must not leave me thus!" resumed Fernanda: "I cannot permit you to depart while any doubt remains in *your* mind respecting *my* feelings. For as yet you only suspect that I loathe—hate—and abhor you," she continued, dwelling with demoniac bitterness upon the words: "whereas it is necessary that you should be convinced. Listen to me, Arthur Eaton—and interrupt me not. My heart is a withered and blighted thing—a crushed and ruined rose-bud: and yet when I contemplate its depths, I can well remember and well understand how ineffable was the aroma of love which it once exhaled. And all that love was thine—freely given and joyously accepted. In return you pledged your own affections, which surrounded me as with a halo of happiness. Then you took advantage of my tenderness—and I resigned my honour into your keeping. Perhaps I also was weak—frail—feeble: but a young woman is never the seducer of a young man! When you had possessed me you began to discover faults in my temper—you accused me of whims—and you upbraided me for caprices. But it was because you desired to play the tyrant and the despot with me, that I asserted my own independence—the independence of a woman! When I knew that I was wrong, and reflection told me that I had behaved unjustly towards you, I besought your pardon—with tears I invoked your forgiveness. And I take God to witness the truth of my assertion, that when I seemed most capricious I loved you the most ardently. Oh! you cannot understand all that there is noble and elevated in the mind of a woman who truly loves. At the very instant when I was vexing you with some whim, I could have torn to pieces any other human being that dared only to look insultingly upon you: at the very moment that I was piquing you with some frivolous coquetry on my part, I could have laid down my life to save you from a single pang. Was this a heart to be trampled beneath your foot? Who is perfect in this world? But no allowance is made for poor Woman! You defoliated the flower of my chastity—you robbed me of my purity—and you then discovered that I was capricious. When I had become to you as a wife in the sight of heaven, you began to find out my faults and my foibles. Just God! did not the immensity of my love in the other scale outweigh them all? But Man conceives that he may trifle as he will with the best and purest affections of Woman's heart—that he may lead her into frailty and seduce her into folly—and then raise up a thousand excuses for not fulfilling the solemn pledges that elicited those concessions of her weak and confiding nature. Yes—these are the ideas which *your* sex entertains: and Woman encourages you in your iniquity because she so seldom avenges her shame and her dishonour. She weeps in secret—but rouses not herself to exertion. She pines—but does not punish. Such will not be the case with me!"

Fernanda fell back exhausted, and panting for breath: for the excitement and the vehemence with which she had spoken were terrible in the extreme.

Arthur Eaton had remained seated in utter stupefaction. He lost not a single word which fell from her lips—but these words petrified him. Statue-like, the unhappy young man listened to those dread reproaches—those dire denunciations—those concluding menaces;—and it appeared to him that he was the victim of some horrible dream. But he saw how much of the upbraiding was true: and he who had endeavoured to cheat himself into the belief that *all* the fault lay on her side, was compelled to confess in the depths of his spirit that the preponderance was indeed on his own.

"Now, then, can you answer me?" inquired Fernanda, suddenly raising herself up in the bed again. "And do you comprehend me?—do you understand why I indeed loathe—hate—and abhor you?—do you know wherefore I crave for vengeance, or why I can be satisfied with that which heaven is wreaking on you?" she demanded, suddenly struck by the fear that she had said too much and that her meaning might perhaps become intelligible. "Oh! think not for a single instant that I could so far forget my wrongs as to accompany you to the altar:—think not that I can now receive as a boon that which you denied me as a right—or that I will accept as a tardy reparation the alliance which you were once proud and happy to propose! No—ten thousand times no! And if, when your last hours come—and they cannot be far distant—if *then* a thought of the injured Fernanda should rise up in your soul and wring you with remorse—Oh! I shall rejoice—I shall rejoice: for I look upon you as my deadliest

foe—my mortal enemy—and the air of this world will be less oppressive to me when *you* shall have ceased to breathe it. And now depart—leave me, Arthur Eaton—I command you!"

But she spoke to one who heard her not: the young man had fainted in his chair.

Fernanda thought that he was dead; and, terror seizing upon her, she rang the bell violently.

Mrs. Lindley, who happened to be in a neighbouring room attending upon the lodger that was unwell, hurried to Miss Aylmer's chamber, where a glance showed her for what purpose she had been summoned. Her experienced eye, however, told her in an instant that it was bnt a swoon into which the Hon. Arthur Eaton had fallen; and to Fernanda's rapid questions she accordingly gave reassuring answers.

Hastily loosening his neckcloth and opening his waistcoat to give him air, the old woman sprinkled water upon his countenance: but he revived not.

"In his weak and enfeebled state, this may end in *death!*" she murmured in a low but impressive whisper to Miss Aylmer.

"No—no—he must not die yet!" exclaimed Fernanda vehemently: "my vengeance is not half complete!"

"Then naught except a few drops of the *antidote* will save him," returned the midwife: "and as his valet will renew the poison to-morrow——"

"Good! I comprehend you: be it so!" ejaculated Fernanda. "He must not die while I am imprisoned here and unable to mark the progress of his rapid decline. Administer the *antidote*."

The vehemence with which Fernanda had spoken, and which Mrs. Lindley in vain endeavoured to check by placing her finger on her lips, had aroused Mr. Eaton somewhat: but the spiritual sense returned sooner than the physical power—and at the instant he awoke to consciousness, the word "*antidote*" fell upon his ear.

The effect was stupifying—and he once more became motionless as a statue. Both the midwife and Fernanda, who had observed the slight convulsive movement which indicated reviving energy, imagined that he had undergone a complete relapse;—and again did the patrician lady urge the old woman to administer the *antidote*.

Eaton was at this moment in the full enjoyment of his reasoning faculties, though still physically powerless and inert;—and that word, falling again on his ears, convinced him that it was not a delusion when he fancied that he had heard Fernanda give utterance to it a minute before.

Mrs. Lindley hurried from the room;—and the dreadful though still vague suspicion which had flashed to the young man's mind nerved him with the courage and armed him with the resolution to remain perfectly still and tranquil, even now when his limbs were so far recovering their powers that he could have moved them if he had chosen. In fact, he was no longer in a swoon: but he affected to be.

"Where an antidote is administered, *there* poison must have previously been. In this case the antidote can do no harm: besides, it is about to be given in order to restore me."

Such were the ideas that flashed through his brain, during the few moments that Mrs. Lindley's absence lasted. When she returned, she carefully closed the door behind her, and approached the arm-chair in which Eaton lay back with his mouth half open and his eyes closed. In another moment he felt a small bottle applied to his lips—and a tasteless fluid trickled down his throat.

Having thus administered the antidote, Mrs. Lindley re-corked the bottle, and secured it about her person.

Eaton now affected slowly to revive; and so well did he perform his part, that not even the experienced eyes of the old midwife could detect his duplicity. She handed him a glass of water, which he drank; and in a few moments his recovery seemed complete.

Rising from the chair, he turned one long reproachful look upon Fernanda, who met that gaze with on e of mingled menace and defiance;—and he then quitted the room.

On rejoining the Countess of Desborough in the parlour down stairs, he communicated to her in a few rapid words the total failure of his interview with Miss Aylmer: but he said nothing of the swoon into which he had fallen, nor the terrible language which had produced it.

The Countess would have visited Fernanda's chamber again in order to try the effect of renewed prayers, arguments, and remonstrances: but Eaton assured her that her kind interference would not only prove vain and useless, at least on the present occasion, but might injuriously add to the excitement into which the scenes of the evening had thrown the young lady. Eleanor accordingly renounced the idea; and Arthur escorted her to the hackney-coach which was waiting at a little distance.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE BANE AND ANTIDOTE.

When the Hon. Mr. Eaton regained his father's town-mansion, which was situate in Hanover Square, he hastened to his own chamber—threw himself upon a sofa—and gave way to his reflections.

These were of a varied and conflicting nature: for there were several features in the adventures of the evening which appeared to be fraught with a strange, deep, and mysterious interest.

Wherefore should an antidote have been administered to him?—could poison possibly be circulating in his veins?—and if so, how was the fact known to Mrs. Lindley and Fernanda, unless they themselves were the poisoners? Had he providentially discovered a clue to that wasting malady which baffled the skill of so many eminent physicians?—if so, then the antidote was in his possession and he could counteract the effect of the venom which was sapping the very principles of his existence.

That Fernanda was fully capable of wreaking the most deadly vengeance upon him, her language of this night had afforded incontestible proof;—and that she was the authoress of his malady, if it could be attributed to human agency at all, certain words which she had uttered amply showed. Her diabolical will was manifested—her vindictive intent had been avowed—and therefore might she not be already prosecuting her scheme of revenge through the medium of some wretch whom heavy bribes had won over to her interests?

If all these conjectures were accurate, then who could this wretch be? Mr. Eaton's suspicions naturally fell upon the man most constantly about

his person—his valet, William Dudley. But this individual had been in the service of the family for several years; and his character was considered to be unimpeachable. Besides, did not William Dudley testify the most affectionate interest towards his young master?—did he not even weep at times when Arthur spoke in his presence of the unknown malady that was carrying him silently and rapidly to the tomb? Yes—but human nature is capable of such vile hypocrisy!

These were the thoughts which now occupied the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and they bewildered him sorely. He had read of wretches living in the middle ages, and who were such adepts in compounding secret poisons that the *aqua tophana*, one of the most mysterious and deadly venoms ever invented by any votary of that detestable school, was represented to have produced upon its victims effects similar to this malady which was undermining himself. Was it possible that the appalling secret could have been revived in the present age?—and was it in the keeping of that old midwife hag?

The presumption was that an affirmative might be given to these questions.

Nevertheless, was it not probable that his ears had deceived him, and that the word "*antidote*" had not been uttered as he was recovering from his swoon?—was it not likely that the reminiscence of the two receipts was uppermost in his mind as he returned to consciousness, and that the earliest idea which then dawned in upon him had been mistaken by his fevered fancy for a word breathed by the lips of those near him?—or, again, was it not possible that, even if that word had been spoken, it was used by an old hag ignorant of its true meaning and applied by her to some specific medicine of her own?

Then came the conviction that it was Fernanda's lips which had breathed this word;—and Eaton felt the assurance growing stronger and stronger in his mind that accident had placed him in the way to unravel mysterious and terrible things.

At all events the copies of the receipts were in his possession; and a skilful chemist would explain to him the real nature and tendency of each.

It being now eleven o'clock, he rang the bell; and his valet almost immediately answered the summons.

Without appearing to regard him more attentively than usual, Mr. Eaton nevertheless scanned William Dudley's countenance with covert keenness: but not a lineament—not a feature—not a look betrayed anything sinister on the part of that man. Of middle age, florid complexion, light hair, good figure, and most respectable appearance, the valet seemed to be a person incapable of doing a dishonest deed, much more of perpetrating a crime of the blackest dye.

Eaton was again baffled and bewildered: but he resolved to permit his mind to come to no decisive opinion until he should have fathomed those mysteries of which he had as yet only commenced the bare initiative study.

Having laid aside his garments, Arthur retired to rest; and the valet arranged the night-table as usual by the side of the couch. A lamp, the means of procuring a speedy light, a book, a decanter of water, and a tumbler were invariably placed in this manner within his reach. He could not bear a light in the room when he felt inclined to sleep: but he chose to have the materials for procuring one, inasmuch as he frequently passed restless hours, which he endeavoured to while away by reading. He suffered much from thirst; and it was no unusual thing for him to empty the decanter of water during the night. At all events he never failed to drink at least one tumbler.

The valet, having arranged the night-table in the manner described, quitted the room.

Sleep did not immediately visit Arthur's eyes; and as he lay meditating upon the singular incidents of the evening, it suddenly occurred to him that the fluid which had been poured down his throat by Mrs. Lindley, and which was denominated the *antidote*, was tasteless. By a natural sequence in his ideas, he reflected that such a fluid, if it were white,—for he did not catch a glimpse of the bottle that was applied to his lips,—would easily be administered in pure water. Then came the thought that if his valet actually were the wretch through whose agency poison had been given to him, the decanter nightly placed by his side was the means by which the deadly potion was conveyed into his system.

But a chemist would give him explanations on this head as well as with respect to the copies of the two receipts.

Slumber at length fell upon the eyes of the Hon. Mr. Eaton; and, awaking at an earlier hour than usual, he fancied that he felt the least thing better. The reader may be sure that he had not touched the water in the decanter during the night: but now, rising from his bed, he emptied its contents into a bottle, which he locked up in one of his drawers. First, however, he poured a few drops into the tumbler, so as to give the glass the appearance of having been used.

Returning to his couch, he rang the bell for his valet; and when that individual appeared, Eaton, who watched him narrowly without seeming to do so, observed that he cast an immediate and hasty look towards the decanter. Nevertheless, there might be nothing in this: it was perhaps accidental—and moreover Eaton's suspicions were calculated to invest very trivial occurrences with the importance of proofs of guilt. At all events the time had not come to accuse William Dudley; and he therefore behaved towards him with his wonted urbanity and kindness.

Having risen and performed his toilette, Arthur sent a verbal apology to his father, Lord Marchmont, for absenting himself from the breakfast-table, on the plea that he was engaged to partake of that meal with a friend. The fact was that he could restrain his curiosity no longer—he felt that he should be unable to eat another mouthful of food until he had consulted a chemist: for he had the strongest hope, amounting almost to a presentiment, that the matters which he was about to investigate were of the importance of life or death to himself!

With the copy of the receipts in his pocket, and the bottle of water beneath his cloak, Arthur Eaton sallied forth from his father's noble mansion in Hanover Square; and directing his steps towards Bond Street, he entered the shop of a celebrated chemist who supplied the family with the medicine made up according to a physician's prescription.

Mr. Bradford—for such was the chemist's name—was surprised at receiving so early a visit from

the Hon. Mr. Eaton, the deplorable state of whose health was of course well known to him;—and he was still more astonished when Arthur, with an air full of mystery, requested to speak to him in the strictest privacy.

Bradford, who was a tall, thin, pale-faced, elderly man, led the way to his laboratory at the back of the premises, and closed the door. Mr. Eaton requested him to lock it—a demand with which he immediately complied, marvelling more and more what could possibly be the meaning of these precautions.

"I must earnestly and imperiously stipulate, in the first instance," began Arthur, "that you will ask me no questions relative to the way in which I obtained possession of certain receipts respecting which I require an explanation."

"It is not my habit to evince an impertinent curiosity, Mr. Eaton," answered Bradford, somewhat hurt by the nature of the remark.

"I did not mean to offend you, my dear sir," exclaimed Arthur, with a warm sincerity which instantly appeased the chemist, who was a good and kind-hearted man. "But should these receipts turn out as I suspect they will, you will at once perceive that there is some profound mystery regarding the way in which they fell into my hands."

"I will treat the matter purely as one of business," replied Mr. Bradford; "and will seek to learn no more than you may think fit to communicate."

"Thank you for this assurance," rejoined Eaton. "Will you now have the kindness to give me your opinion relative to the two receipts which are written on the back of this letter?"

Mr. Bradford put on his spectacles, took the paper, and read it with deep attention. At length, raising his eyes, he fixed a look of mingled congratulation and surprise upon Arthur, saying, "I am much mistaken if you do not now possess the clue to the malady which has been destroying you, as well as the secret of its cure."

"The great God be praised!" exclaimed the young man, joining his hands fervently. "Oh! if this were indeed the case——But it is a happiness too great—too great!"

And he melted into tears. For all in a moment the premature winter of his life appeared suddenly to spring into vernal bloom again: the withered branches of his decaying existence seemed to clothe themselves abruptly with a renovated verdure;—hope—bright and brilliant hope—shed forth its radiant beams upon his head;—and he already felt as if he were treading the earth with the firm foot and the elastic step of a vigorous youthfulness, instead of creeping mournfully over its surface with the despondent manner of a caducity about to close in the sleep of death!

"Yes—it is as I have said!" cried the chemist in a joyous tone. "The one receipt is a slow—fatal—and mysterious poison: the other is its antidote. Oh! well indeed may the former be denominated the *Heir's Friend*: for anything more sure—more certain to effect a deadly purpose could not well be conceived. Never did the ingenuity of man accomplish so wonderful, but at the same time so horrible a combination as this? The uses and effects of each component part, viewed separately, are well known to the merest novice in chemical studies: but never would it strike any one to throw these ingredients together. Accident or the promptings of Satan must have been the origin of this infernal mixture."

"What colour would it be? and what taste would it have?" inquired Arthur, so overjoyed at the almost incredible good news which he had received that he could scarcely restrain his impatience to ask additional questions: for he longed to begin taking the antidote—he yearned also to assure his afflicted father that a change had manifested itself in him and that there was yet room to hope.

"The colour would be white—or rather, there would be no colour at all," responded the chemist; "and the fluid would be utterly tasteless."

"And those remarks apply alike to the poison and the antidote?" exclaimed Arthur.

"Precisely so. But it must have been Providence that placed these secrets in your way, my dear Mr. Eaton," continued Bradford, pressing the young man's hand warmly, and even shedding tears—so deep was the interest now inspired within him towards one to whom heaven's mercy or else a marvellous accident had pointed out the issue leading from the path of death to the temple of salvation.

"My dear friend, I thank you most cordially for this sympathy and kind feeling on your part," responded Arthur, down whose cheeks the tears likewise fell thick and fast. "The hand of God is in this—and never, never shall I cease to adore His holy name. If I be indeed spared—if my cure should in reality be effected ——"

"It will be—it must be!" interrupted the chemist emphatically. "The bane is in your blood—the antidote is in your hands!"

"Then will I devote to good, and virtuous, and honourable purposes that existence which the Almighty has so miraculously vouchsafed to rescue from the jaws of an early grave," exclaimed Arthur Eaton, not uttering these words in the enthusiasm of a moment or in obedience to a passing impulse—but deeply and solemnly feeling their force and weighing their tendency.

"I am not superstitious," said the chemist, likewise adopting a serious tone: "but when I think of the condition in which you have been—in which you indeed still are,—*then*, when I reflect that some means, the nature whereof I seek not to learn, have opened to your knowledge the cause of your malady and placed in your hands the sure and certain method of its cure,—I do not hesitate to say that your affliction and your redemption will have been intended for purposes having their origin and destiny in the divine wisdom."

"Such will ever be my own sentiments," exclaimed Arthur. "But now," he added, pointing to the bottle which he had placed on the table when first entering the room, "will you be so kind as to tell me whether that fluid contains anything prejudicial to him who might drink it?"

Mr. Bradford forthwith proceeded to submit the contents of the bottle to several chemical tests; and while he was thus engaged, Arthur watched him with the deepest anxiety and most intense interest. Thus upwards of half-an-hour elapsed; and at the expiration of that interval, the chemist said in a solemn tone, "The water which that bottle contained was poisoned according to the receipt entitled the *Heir's Friend*."

"Then farewell to all confidence in the reading of the human physiognomy!" exclaimed Arthur, his thoughts instantly settling upon William Dudley. "But, no—I was wrong thus to speak," he observed hurriedly: "there are exceptions to all

rules—and I must continue to believe that the same Deity who created Man in his own image, made the countenance a reflex of the mind. This is the rule: the other is the exception. Mr. Bradford, I am deeply—deeply indebted to you for the trouble which you have taken and the interest you have manifested in my behalf. May I now request that you will prepare me the antidote, which is to restore me to health and happiness?"

"It will take me two hours to compound the mixture, Mr. Eaton," was the answer. "Shall I send it to your residence?"

"No: in the afternoon I will call for it. I do not wish that a single soul beneath my father's roof should learn that I am indebted to medicine for this miraculous resuscitation which is to take place. It must be believed that nature herself is working her own cure by means as mysterious as those which my friends imagine to be the cause of my malady."

Eaton then took his leave of the chemist, to whom he offered no pecuniary recompense. But he went straight to a goldsmith's in the same street;—and in the course of the day Mr. Bradford received a complete service of very handsome silver plate, which could not possibly have cost less than five hundred guineas.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MRS. FITZHERBERT.

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon: and the Prince of Wales was seated at breakfast with a lady in one of the most elegant apartments of Carlton House.

The companion of the heir-apparent on this occasion was a woman of remarkable beauty. Her complexion was delicately fair—not of an insipid paleness, nor white as marble or as snow; but of a transparent living white such as the soft and velvet-like skin ought to be, and which no painter can imitate on his canvass. On each round cheek there appeared the tint of the rose, which could easily deepen, with excitement or animation, into a richer and a warmer glow.

Her hair was very light,—not flaxen—nor yellow—nor auburn;—but of that indescribable paleness which is nevertheless glossy and shining, and which, in the sun's rays or in the lustre of lamps, seems as if it were sprinkled with gold dust. She however wore it powdered, and arranged in a myriad curls: and although that style, borrowed from the Court of Louis XVI of France, was a disfigurement in nine cases out of ten, it appeared exquisitely becoming to the lady whom we are describing.

Her eyes were large, and of a light, clear, liquid blue—usually languishing and tender: but sometimes lighting up with an expression which commanded, or with a lustre which overawed. From a soul formed for love did those eyes borrow the sweetness that smiled from them; and more melting would they grow beneath the gaze of him to whom her heart was given.

Her nose was remarkable for its classic shape; and its beautifully finished outline imparted an air of inconceivable grace to the general contour of the countenance. Her mouth was full and ripe, but not coarse; and her teeth were perfect in evenness and brilliancy.

In stature she was not above the middle height: and although her charms had expanded into the luxuriance of maturity, yet her figure had not lost its symmetry. The sweeping outlines of her robust arms, bare to the shoulders—the fulness but plump roundness of the bosom which a low dress more than half-revealed—the swan-like curvature of the proud neck—and the wavy development of the entire form,—all these constituted an assemblage of charms most suited to the taste of the libidinous Prince, and in which he rejoiced to revel.

This lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert.

She was now in her thirty-ninth year, but in all the glory of her charms—in all the splendour of her beauty. She had been twice married before she became acquainted with the heir-apparent: but she was without issue from either of those alliances. In religious faith she was a Roman Catholic, and was slightly tinged with bigotry: nevertheless, she was addicted to pleasure, fond of society, and not particularly scrupulous in her morals—as her amour with the Marquis of Bellois fully testified.

At the time of which we are writing, Mrs. Fitzherbert dwelt openly with the Prince of Wales. She had her suite of apartments in Carlton House, where she received her own friends and gave elegant entertainments;—and she likewise presided at the balls and soirées given by the heir-apparent himself. In every respect was she treated and looked upon as his wife, save in name: for it was always as *Mrs. Fitzherbert* that she was spoken of by his Royal Highness or addressed by others.

But to return to our narrative.

It was, as we have already said, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon; and the Prince of Wales was breakfasting with Mrs. Fitzherbert in one of her own rooms at Carlton House.

They had dismissed the attendants in order to converse without restraint: for it was evident by their manner that something had occurred to give them annoyance.

"And when did you hear of his Majesty's intention?" inquired the lady, after a long pause; and her voice, naturally soft and pleasing, was rendered perfectly melodious by the melancholy plaintiveness which now characterised it.

"Last night, my love," responded the Prince. "I had been to call on the Earl and Countess of Desborough, who have returned to town; and as I was returning home in my carriage I met a friend who was on horseback. He beckoned the coachman to stop, as he had something of importance to communicate: and he assured me in a hurried whisper at the carriage-window that the thing was the talk of the clubs. It appears that Ministers received yesterday morning a message from my august father, intimating his desire that such an alliance should take place;—a Cabinet Council was held in the afternoon;—and a few hours later the matter was known throughout the West End."

"And who was this friend that seems to have been the first to communicate so important a project to the personage principally concerned and interested in it?" asked Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Oh! you know him well enough, my dear," replied the Prince. "It was that kind-hearted, useful——"

"And good-for-nothing fellow Tim Meagles," added the lady, finishing the sentence of the heir-apparent for him—her brows contracting with dis-

pleasure at the same time. "I am sorry, George, that you are so fond of that individual's society."

"By God!" exclaimed the Prince, somewhat angrily: "I should not know very well how to do without him. And you must admit, my love," he added, in a milder tone, "that Mr. Meagles has always conducted himself with the utmost respect towards you. Indeed, I fancied that you were better pleased with him lately than you used to be; and upon the strength of that opinion I was foolish enough to tell him to call upon me in your apartments this morning. He received my instructions to glean all he could concerning this intended marriage——"

"Marriage!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance suddenly becoming flushed with indignation. "Surely, George, you do not dream that the project can ever be realized—that the design so secretly planned by your royal father can ever arrive at such an issue?"

"I am at *your* mercy, my dearest creature, answered the Prince.

"At *my* mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now starting from her seat. "What! do you even for a single instant harbour the thought——"

"Silence, I implore you!" cried the heir-apparent, also rising from his chair. "We know not how easily we may be overheard! Be assured that I will do nothing without previously consulting you—that I will make as many sacrifices as I dare, short of my right to the crown——"

"And even *that* have you sworn to renounce sooner than act a perfidious part towards *me!*" interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of deep solemnity.

The Prince was about to reply, when the door opened, and Tim Meagles entered the room.

He instantly saw that there was something wrong: but he was too good a tactician to appear to notice it;—and, with a low obeisance to Mrs. Fitzherbert,

he took the hand which the Prince of Wales held out to him.

The lady returned his salutation with cold courtesy, and resumed her seat. The Prince threw himself upon a sofa, and invited Meagles to take a chair, inquiring at the same time whether he had breakfasted.

"Yes—hours ago," was the answer: "and since then I have been gathering all the intelligence I could scrape together respecting——"

He stopped, and glanced towards the lady.

"You may continue, sir," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "His Royal Highness has no secrets with me," she added in a dignified manner.

"It is all true—just as I told you," proceeded Meagles, addressing himself to the Prince. "The King has communicated to the Ministers his desire that your Royal Highness should espouse the Princess Caroline of Brunswick: the Cabinet assembled yesterday afternoon and discussed the question;—and it was agreed to retain the affair a secret for a short time longer. But somehow or another the rumour got afloat in the evening—and now it is known to be correct."

"Upon my honour," exclaimed the Prince, indignantly, "my august father has a magnificent notion of the way to cater for his son's happiness;—and Mr. Pitt and his friends in the Cabinet dispose of the destinies of the heir-apparent to the throne with as much coolness as a magistrate displays when he commits a vagrant to the House of Correction."

"It will be *your* fault if you submit tamely to these indignities," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, emphatically. "The contemplated alliance becomes the talk of the town even before the faintest hint has been dropped to yourself."

"It is too bad," returned the Prince. "But what more have you heard, Meagles? Tell us everything, and without reserve: Mrs. Fitzherbert will be all the better pleased with you."

"There is a report that your Royal Highness's private affairs were also discussed yesterday at the Cabinet Council," said Tim: "and I know that the rumour is correct."

"What was mooted?—and how are you aware that the story is true?" demanded the Prince, with feverish impatience, and with a hasty glance at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"In the first place," answered Meagles, "it is said that Mr. Pitt proposed to his colleagues a scheme for the settlement of the debts contracted by your Royal Highness, and which project will be submitted to Parliament when it meets next month. Secondly, I am sure that such was the case, because the editor of the Government evening paper is an intimate friend of mine; and I have been with him this morning. There'll appear an article, in the shape of what may be termed a '*feeler*,' in to-night's edition."

"Even the very scrubs of the press receive such important intelligence earlier than I," exclaimed the Prince, in a tone which proved how deeply he was mortified. "It is the most underhand thing I ever knew in all my life."

"I can assure you that my friend Percy Booth, the editor, is no scrub," said Meagles, somewhat annoyed at the supercilious manner in which his Royal Highness spoke of the gentlemen of the press collectively, and consequently of him individually. "He is a fine fellow—will do a good action—sings a capital song—and is a famous hand with the gloves."

"No insult was intended to your friend, sir," observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose sensitiveness was shocked at the idea of a man's amiable qualities being summed up in the singing of bacchanalian airs and in pugilistic skilfulness.

"So much the better, madam," said Meagles, who saw that Mrs. Fitzherbert could barely tolerate his presence: and, by way of retaliation, he remarked, "By the bye, your Royal Highness will be delighted with a certain French nobleman who longs to be presented to you. He is a refugee——"

"Ah! indeed," exclaimed the heir-apparent, fancying that Meagles was adopting this indirect mode of letting him know that he had discovered another rich emigrant, who, like the Marquis of St. Croix, would be glad to entrust his money to the princely keeping. "I shall be pleased to show suitable attention to any French nobleman who has suffered through devotion to his Sovereign. What is the name of your new foreign acquaintance?"

"The Marquis of Bellois," responded Meagles;—and he threw a furtive glance towards Mrs. Fitzherbert to notice the effect which the mention of this name would have upon her.

She turned ashy pale, and for an instant appeared to reel upon her chair, as if seized with a sudden vertigo: but recovering herself the next moment, she darted a rapid look at Meagles, to ascertain whether he had any sinister meaning in thus introducing the name of that nobleman.

Their eyes met, and were instantaneously averted;—and while the lady affected to be arranging her brooch, Meagles glanced towards the Prince. His Royal Highness had not observed the momentary confusion on the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert, nor the rapid looks that followed it: for he had fallen into a profound reverie, the matrimonial project devised by his father having sorely troubled him.

"Yes," continued Meagles, who was determined to convince Mrs. Fitzherbert that she must not hope to domineer over him or treat him with contempt in future,—"this Marquis of Bellois is a very nice man, and must have been uncommonly handsome a few years ago. But I am afraid he is rather dissipated—indeed, that he is given to gambling. If so, he will find plenty of English sharks ready to prey upon him."

"We were discussing more important matters, I think, Mr. Meagles," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, who had now recovered her self-possession: for a few moments' reflection had led her to believe—or rather to flatter herself—that the Marquis of Bellois was too high-minded and generous a man to have betrayed her secret to Mr. Timothy Meagles.

"We will return to the former topic, madam, since such is your pleasure," observed this individual. "But, by the bye, the Marquis informed me that he had the honour of becoming acquainted with you, during your residence at Plombiers, and afterwards in Paris, several years ago."

An ice-bolt seemed to shoot through the heart of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as Tim Meagles uttered these words in a measured tone, and with his gaze fixed intently upon her countenance. She felt that she was once more turning deadly pale—that her lips quivered—

that the perspiration burst forth upon her brow: for it was now impossible to close her eyes to the fact that the Marquis de Bellois *had* betrayed her, and that Mr. Meagles was the depository of the terrible secret of her amour with that nobleman.

Starting in her chair, as if awakening from a hideous dream, she threw an affrighted glance towards the Prince: but he was still buried in thought, and had not observed her changing countenance nor her agitated manner. Considerably relieved, Mrs. Fitzherbert rose from her seat; and approaching Meagles, who stood up as she thus advanced towards him, she said, "For your devotion to the Prince I sincerely thank you. For the good offices which you have occasionally performed for me, at the request of his Royal Highness, I also tender you my gratitude. I did not know your good disposition thoroughly until this morning: but his Royal Highness has quite effaced any disagreeable impressions which misrepresentations may have made upon my mind; —and henceforth we will be friends, Mr. Meagles."

Having uttered these words in her blandest tones, assuming at the same time her most enchanting smiles, the lady extended her hand with an apparent frankness, which did not however for a single moment deceive the individual to whom it was proffered.

Nevertheless, he had no inclination to continue, at least for the present, the little warfare which he had so successfully commenced. The triumph was his own: he had humbled the haughty beauty;—nay, more—he had convinced her that she was in his power;—and he was satisfied. For he was very far from being naturally spiteful: but he could not endure to be treated with contumely or indifference.

Accepting, therefore, the fair hand that was tendered with such seeming grace, he said significantly, "It will be your own fault, madam, if I ever become your enemy;"—and thus terminated this little incident which had at one time overwhelmed Mrs. Fitzherbert with the most crushing fears.

The Prince, who had not observed anything of all this, was now awakened from his deep reverie by some remark which the lady addressed to him; and the discourse again turned on the matrimonial project that had been set afloat at the Court and in the Cabinet.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE BALL.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed from the date of the incidents just recorded; and at eight o'clock, on a damp and inclement evening, carriages began to arrive one after another in rapid succession, at the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square. From the windows of the spacious dwelling, in spite of the rich curtains drawn within, poured floods of mellowed light; and soon the sounds of music came floating forth upon the air.

Lord Marchmont gave a grand ball that evening. So evident an improvement had taken place in the health of his only son and heir, the Hon. Mr. Eaton, that the old nobleman's heart had become accessible to joy once more;—and his elegant saloons were accordingly thrown open to the *élite* of the fashion and aristocracy at the West End.

Though the weather was so ungenial without, and the poor shivering beggar was forced to wrap his rags more closely around him, yet within the vast and lofty rooms of that splendid mansion, all was brilliant and delightful. The air was warm and perfumed: the lustre of innumerable lamps and magnificent chandeliers was reflected in the immense mirrors, which also multiplied the elegant and beauteous forms that were now assembling;—stars shone on the breasts of nobles, and diamonds sparkled on the brows of charming ladies. The atmosphere was harmonious with the music of many instruments and the melody of many soft voices;—and every countenance appeared radiant with happiness.

Lord Marchmont was an old man, with features naturally stern and haughty in expression, but which could relax into smiles on such occasions as the present. His cheeks were furrowed with wrinkles, and his form was bowed with the weight of years: yet was there in his step, his air, and his conversation, all that indomitable pride which seems so inveterate a characteristic of the English aristocracy,—a pride which buoys them up with the insensate hope that even as their ancestors have worn coronets and rolled in riches for centuries past, so will their descendants be enabled to perpetuate that same hereditary usurpation of honours and of gold for centuries to come.

The Hon. Mr. Eaton was certainly much improved in appearance. Though still very pale, thin, and feeble, he was nevertheless in far better spirits than he had been for months before; and the feverish lustre of his eyes had partially subsided into a more natural and healthy appearance. His step was more elastic—his tread more assured;—and he could smile—yes, with an unfeigned gaiety—upon those with whom he stopped to converse for a few minutes as he passed through the rooms, arm-in-arm with his father, to welcome the numerous guests.

"I do not see Mr. Clarendon," said Arthur to Lord Marchmont, as they entered the principal saloon, having traversed all those which led to it, and which were thronged with the gay and brilliant assemblage. "Are you sure that our card of invitation was delivered at the right address?—for you know, dear father, that he has removed to Cavendish Square."

"I am not only certain that the card reached him," replied Lord Marchmont; "but also that he will be here with his daughters. For, observing during the last few days that you expressed so much anxiety to see them all here this evening, I called at their house in Cavendish Square yesterday afternoon ——"

"And they promised to honour us with their presence?" exclaimed Arthur, with eagerness.

"Yes. But wherefore, my dear boy, are you so desirous to see them?" asked Lord Marchmont, in a low tone. "Now that so signal a change has taken place in your health, and that I may felicitate myself upon the certainty of my coronet passing to you, I rather repent having taken Mr. Clarendon by the hand."

"My dear father," said the young man, stopping short and gazing intently upon the old peer's countenance,—"you know not what pain you give me when you speak thus. It is precisely because Mr. Clarendon and his daughters had for years—indeed, until within the last three or four weeks—been treated with such cruel neglect and cold indifference on our part, that I am determined to make all the atonement that lies in my power. Therefore shall I show them the most marked attention;—and if you really value

my health and happiness, dear father," he added in a lower but more impressive tone,—"you will aid me in thus convincing them that they are truly welcome here, not as mere guests—but as members of the family."

"You know, my dear boy, that I will do anything to bring back the smiles to your countenance," said the old peer. "It was to give you pleasure that I called on the Clarendons yesterday to insist upon their coming to-night. They had already intended to accept our invitation, and had written the usual answer, which must however have miscarried. But there they are: let us hasten to welcome them."

As Lord Marchmont spoke, Mr. Clarendon entered the saloon, Octavia leaning on his right arm and Pauline on his left. Never had those two young ladies appeared to greater advantage: there was something alike noble and ravishing in their splendid style of beauty. Dressed with taste and elegance, and carrying themselves with a modest dignity and an indescribable grace, they seemed to have been born and nurtured in that sphere of fashion which they were indeed now entering for the first time.

The eyes of all present in that spacious apartment were fixed upon these charming girls as they made their appearance. The ladies could not help paying them the tacit compliment of admiration; and the nobles and gentlemen murmured to each other the praises which sprang to their lips as their looks became rivetted on Mr. Clarendon's daughters.

In a few moments they were accosted by Lord Marchmont and the Hon. Mr. Eaton. The latter was duly presented by his father to the young ladies, who had expected to receive a cold, haughty, and reserved courtesy from him, and who were therefore highly delighted and most agreeably disappointed by the welcome which he gave them.

Shaking them cordially by the hand, he said, "My dear cousins, you must think me very unkind not to have called upon you. You may even imagine that I was not eager to make your acquaintance. But you would do me a serious injustice were you to entertain such an impression. The truth is, I am only beginning to recover from a long and severe malady, as your excellent father has doubtless informed you; and I have been compelled to remain at home during the last fortnight in consequence of the inclement weather. Then, again, I knew that you were occupied in removing to your new residence; and I am well aware that ladies do not like to be disturbed when thus engaged. Now, however, that my health is greatly improving and that you are doubtless settled by this time in Cavendish Square, I promise myself the pleasure of visiting you frequently. Come—we will leave your father to converse with mine, while I conduct you to seats."

And having thus addressed Octavia and Pauline in the most affable manner, and with the familiarity of a relation instead of the reserved politeness of a mere friend—much less with the cold reserve of a stranger—he gave each an arm and led them slowly through the suite of drawing-rooms.

"Now that I hope I have made my peace with you, charming cousins, for not calling upon you," resumed Eaton, who in reality had abstained from visiting them hitherto in order that he might afford them a more decided proof of his good feeling by paying them a marked attention in the presence of the fashion and rank assembled on the present occasion—"and now that I have unburthened myself of all adequate apologies on that point," he continued gaily, "I must give you due notice that I am likely to become a very troublesome visitor at your house. For I shall observe no cold ceremony: such formality is ridiculous between relatives. Therefore I shall intrude myself on you when the humour takes me—and while you are busied with your drawing or your embroidery, I shall read to you. Or else you shall treat me to some music now and then: for I am sure you are proficients in that art. Now, tell me—shall I be welcome on such terms?"

"We shall always be delighted to see you, Mr. Eaton," answered Octavia, who, as well as her sister, was as much charmed as amazed by the warm friendship and unaffected cordiality which their relative demonstrated towards them.

"Nay—if you call me *Mr. Eaton*," he instantly observed, "I shall think that you mean to treat me as any other visitor. We are cousins—and I have already declared that ceremony must not exist between us. Oh! you do not know how many inquiries I have made concerning you. I am well aware that your Christian names are Octavia and Pauline; and you are the elder—therefore your name is Octavia;—and yours is Pauline," he added, looking first at the sister who leant on his right arm, and then at the one who was supported on his left. "Henceforth I shall call you Octavia and Pauline—and you will have the kindness to call me Arthur—or I shall very soon quarrel with you both, I can assure you."

"At least you will allow us to thank you, Arthur, for your generous kindness towards us," said Pauline.

"No—indeed I will not," he answered immediately, and with a playful smile upon his countenance. "It would be as if I were affecting a sentiment which I do not in reality feel. But the dancing is about to commence, my charming cousins—and I must find you suitable partners. I dare not venture upon a quadrille at present: otherwise I would open the ball with you, Octavia. But I shall conduct you both to seats, and leave you for a few minutes; you will however speedily see me again."

Thus speaking, he escorted the two young ladies to a sofa; and then, mingling with the brilliant assembly thronging the room to which he had thus led them, he selected a handsome young nobleman, with whom he was intimately acquainted, as a partner for Octavia. Having introduced them to each other, he again looked around; and his eyes fell upon Lord Florimel, who was at that moment entering the room. Pauline, from the place where she sate, simultaneously recognised the young peer whose image dwelt in her bosom; and when she saw Arthur Eaton accost him, shake him familiarly by the hand, and then advance down the saloon leaning on his arm, her heart fluttered with indescribable emotions of pleasure.

But she had time to compose her countenance ere Lord Florimel stood before her; and he also, by a powerful effort, subdued the mingled joy and amazement which seized upon him when he thus found himself in the presence of the charming girl whom he had never once forgotten since that memorable night which he passed at Paradise Villa.

In the meantime Octavia had been led away by her partner to join the dance; and the reader may conceive the surprise and momentary confusion

which she experienced when she beheld her sister leaning on the arm of Lord Florimel, as they took their places in the same quadrille. But almost immediately the music commenced; and, feeling convinced that Florimel was a man of honour who would not betray her secret, Octavia recovered her self-possession and yielded herself up to the pleasing excitement of the dance.

"At length we meet again, dear Pauline," said Lord Florimel in a low tone to his beautiful partner, when the arrangements of the quadrille allowed them leisure to converse. "I have been anxiously seeking the means of obtaining an introduction to your father: but your cousin Eaton was too unwell to leave home—and Lord Marchmont has been so solicitous on account of his son's health, that I found myself completely baffled."

"Were they aware that your lordship desired to be presented to us?" asked Pauline, casting down her eyes and blushing beneath the tender looks which her partner threw upon her.

"No—assuredly not," was his instantaneous reply. "They would naturally have imagined that I must have some hidden motive in requesting their agency to introduce me to you. But if I had been able to induce one of them to walk or ride out with me, I should have managed the matter in some way or another. However, we have met at last—I am now formally presented to you—and that is the essential. But tell me, dearest Pauline—are you pleased, on your side, that this has happened?"

"Did I appear very much annoyed when I saw your lordship approaching with Mr. Eaton just now?" said Pauline, raising her head and meeting his eyes with a smiling countenance.

"But wherefore do you call me by the cold title of *lordship?*" asked Florimel.

"Were we alone together—or at a greater distance from those who might now overhear us—I should call you *Gabriel*," answered Pauline. "I am not fickle nor capricious," she added, in a low tone; "and you will not find me to-morrow different from what I am to-night. Am I to hope that it is the same with you?" she said, again bending upon him a look which, though almost immediately averted again, was eloquent with the silent language of love.

"Did I not assure you, ere we parted on that memorable night to which for many reasons I blush to allude, and upon which I must nevertheless always restrospect with pleasure, inasmuch as it not only made me acquainted with you, but gave me in a few hours a deeper insight into your character than years of ordinary friendship could have afforded,—did I not then assure you, dearest Pauline," demanded the young nobleman, "that you had worked a great and signal change within me?—did I not declare that I had suddenly learnt to love you with an affection unknown to me before?"

"Yes," murmured the maiden: "and have you not once repented of those assurances during the interval which has elapsed since they were given?"

"Not once — I solemnly assure you, Pauline," answered Lord Florimel, in a tone of profound sincerity. "Can you not believe me? Perhaps you have heard that I am wild and fickle; but is there not a period in every man's life when circumstances stamp his character with stability?—and young as I am may not that hour have been proclaimed by the time-piece of my destiny?"

"I hope and believe so," answered Pauline: "otherwise we should not now be conversing thus familiarly."

"And thus tenderly," rejoined Florimel, as he took her hand to lead her again into the maze of the dance.

The figure of the quadrille now compelled the young nobleman and his partner to pass near the spot where Octavia stood: but he did not seem to recognise her—for inasmuch as, to all appearances, he had only that evening been introduced for the first time to Pauline, it would have seemed strange were he to acknowledge her sister as a previous acquaintance. For Arthur Eaton was seated at a short distance, watching the dancers: and Lord Marchmont and Mr. Clarendon were standing on the threshold of the room, conversing together, and likewise regarding the progress of the quadrille.

But when the dance was over, and Florimel had conducted Pauline to a seat, Octavia was escorted back by her own partner to her sister's side: and then the young nobleman requested the honour of Octavia's hand for the next quadrille. Both the young ladies appreciated all the delicacy and good taste which thus characterised Florimel's conduct; and while the elder darted upon him a look of grateful acknowledgment, the younger felt that she loved him more, if possible, than ever.

During the time that Florimel and Octavia now danced together, not a word fell from his lips respecting the past. He never once alluded to the incidents of that morning when he conducted her home to Paradise Villa: but he told her, in a cordial manner, "that he intended to become a frequent visitor in Cavendish Square, having already received the permission of Miss Pauline to that effect." To this remark Octavia replied by an emphatic assurance that he would always be welcome; and thus was it that the young nobleman, by his considerate behaviour, not only convinced the young lady that her secret was deemed by him to be inviolable, but that his sentiments towards her sister were of the most honourable character.

In fact, throughout the entire evening, he paid a marked attention to Pauline. When the sisters were not engaged in the dance, he remained in conversation with them; and it was a pleasing spectacle to behold that group consisting of two of the most charming creatures on whom nature ever lavished her choicest gifts, and that young man so faultless in the femininely handsome cast of his features and the delicate symmetry of his form.

When the supper-rooms were thrown open, the Hon. Mr. Eaton escorted Octavia and Florimel gave his arm to Pauline to the luxuriously spread table; and when the hour of separation at length arrived, the sisters returned home delighted with the attentions which they had received on the occasion of their first appearance in the fashionable world.

CHAPTER XLVI.

JULIA.—MR. GRUMLEY.

It was about six o'clock in the evening of the day following the ball at Lord Marchmont's residence, that Mrs. Page, dressed in very mean attire, entered Thacker's Court, which was the name of that place where the house that she used to live in was situated. But instead of stopping at her own late abode, which

was now empty and silent, she knocked at the door of the adjoining premises; and her summons was immediately answered by the man Briggs.

"Ah! Julia my dear," he exclaimed, the moment that the light which he held in his hand flashed upon her countenance: "how d'ye do? I am quite delighted to see you. Walk in."

The young woman instantly accepted the invitation, and followed Briggs into his parlour, where she sate down. He insisted upon her laying aside her cloak and bonnet; and when he observed that she was so poorly dressed, he exclaimed, "Why, the world doesn't seem to jog well with you, Julia. Take a drop of something to console you—and tell me what you've been doing with yourself since I saw you last."

Suiting the action to the word, Briggs filled a glass with gin, which he handed to Mrs. Page; and when she had imbibed the dram, he indulged himself in one, drinking to her "better luck."

"Let me see," he continued, taking a seat, and scratching the enormous wen upon his hideous head, —"when was it that I saw you last? Oh! about a fortnight ago, when you came to bury your poor father. You told me then that you had hopes of obtaining a situation, and you seemed in very good spirits, What's happened since?"

"Oh! disappointment—nothing but disappointment," answered Julia, assuming a tone and air of deep vexation: for as Briggs entertained not the slightest idea relative to her marriage, nor even suspected that she was acquainted with Page, she had her own reasons for not enlightening him upon that head. "I have failed in all my endeavours to do anything honest to obtain a livelihood," she added; "and that's the reason I am here now."

"Why—what do you suppose I can do for you, Julia?" demanded the man.

"Well, I don't know," she answered. "But I thought that perhaps you could find some means of making me useful. You've a great many acquaintances: there's the Magsman—and Carrotty Poll—and the Gallows' Widow—and the Big Beggarman—and the Kinchin Grand——"

"Oh! yes—that's all very good!" exclaimed Briggs. "But you know I'm more of a servant to the Magsman, than a master. Besides, you had an opportunity of belonging to us, if you'd liked, long ago: but you always seemed to treat us so coolly——"

"Ah! that was when my father was alive and I didn't think I should ever want your assistance," replied Julia. "But I was wrong—very wrong to act in that manner; and now I'm sorry for it. I'd do anything if you'd only forgive me. The fact is, I'm houseless and penniless," she added, bursting into tears; "and if you don't do something for me, I must go and drown myself in the river."

"Come—leave off crying, there's a dear," said Briggs, in a tone which he endeavoured to render as consolatory as possible. "We won't let you starve. But I really thought you had gone upon the town."

"I'd sooner destroy myself at once—for that's what I dread," exclaimed Julia. "No—no: I'll never do that! You suppose that because I used to go with young men when I lived next door, that I must be a thorough bad one. But if I had my fancies, I never was a prostitute—and never will be."

"Well, well—I didn't mean to annoy you, Julia. You know that we're none of us very particular—I mean them that frequents this house; and so I spoke accordingly. But tell me, Julia—did your father leave you without a penny piece?" demanded the man.

"Without more than was enough to bury him in the wretched way that you saw," answered the young woman.

"And all his papers?" continued Briggs, interrogatively.

"I found none—although I looked everywhere," was the reply.

"Nor yet any of those pretty shiners, you know?"

"Not a single one."

"Well—that's a pity!" exclaimed the man. "I really thought the old fellow must have had a store of them somewhere or another."

"I dug up the cellar—hunted everywhere—up chimneys, in dark corners, and even in the roof," responded Julia: "but I could find nothing."

"It's a bore about the papers being lost," said Briggs: "because, according to all accounts, some of them must have been of value."

"Ah! I wish I had them," exclaimed the young woman: "I should not perhaps be as unhappy as I am now. But can you do anything for me?—is there no way in which I can possibly assist you in any of your plans? I would serve you faithfully——"

"Well, the truth is that we can always make use of a person like you," interrupted Briggs. "But, don't you see, we're obliged to be so very particular and cautious."

"Quite right," returned Julia. "At the same time you are well aware that I am tolerably trustworthy: for a good many of your secrets are already known to me—all your transactions with my late father—especially the business with the Aylesbury bankers: and yet I never split upon you—I'd cut my head off sooner."

"Well, I think you would, Julia," observed Briggs, approvingly. "Come—I'll undertake to admit you into our body; and I dare say the Magsman won't be angry with me for doing it of my own accord. So make yourself comfortable. He'll be here to-night at twelve punctually: and so will the Gallows' Widow and the Big Beggarman. They've got a little business to settle with those very Aylesbury bankers you was a-talking of."

"What! Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey?" exclaimed Julia.

"Just so. To tell you the truth, Mr. Ramsey is in this house at present—up-stairs at this very moment," answered Briggs, in a confidential tone. "He has been here this fortnight, and is only just recovered from a very severe illness. In fact, he was half-drowned—and the Magsman brought him here in a hackney-coach one night, from the Mariners' Arms—that public-house, you know, down by Execution Dock."

"I know it well enough," returned Julia. "Poor gentleman! was it an accident, then?"

"Why—not exactly," answered Briggs, with a coarse chuckle. "The fact is, he and the Big Beggarman and some others were in a boat together—and, as he had a bag of gold with him, the Beggarman gave him a shove overboard. But he was picked up by another party, and taken to the Mariners' Arms. There the Magsman went, disguised as a gentleman—a slap-up Bond Street swell—and got him away. Since then Ramsey has forgiven

the Beggarman for the little *accident*," added Briggs, with a significant look;—"for the fact is, the Aylesbury bankers can't very well do without our assistance at this moment."

"Then Mr. Ramsey has quite recovered?" said Julia.

"Oh! quite. But he considers it safe to remain here for a day or two longer—particularly as Mr. Martin is in town and can come and consult with him when it's necessary," continued Briggs. "Martin will be here to-night at twelve;—and we shall have a regular council of war."

At this moment there was an impatient knock at the street-door; and Briggs, bidding Julia not to disturb herself, hastened to answer the summons.

"Ah! Mr. Martin—is that you?" said the man, surprised at the appearance of the banker several hours before the appointed time. "Has anything happened? But walk in."

And Briggs led the way into the parlour where Julia was seated.

"Mr. Martin drew back on perceiving a strange woman: but Briggs hastened to observe, "It's all right, sir. She's one of our party—and you may speak before her."

The Aylesbury banker, who was a man well stricken in years and of a most respectable exterior, threw himself upon a chair: for he was evidently exhausted;—and, laying aside his hat and cloak, he said, "Is Mr. Ramsey above?"

"He is, sir. Shall I call him down?" asked Briggs.

Martin nodded an assent; and the man immediately summoned Ramsey to the parlour.

"This young woman is the daughter of old Lightfoot, who's dead," said Briggs; "and therefore we need have no secrets from her."

"Has anything happened?" demanded Ramsey, with feverish impatience, and addressing himself to his partner. "You look care-worn—anxious—annoyed——"

"Annoyed indeed!" exclaimed Martin, in a tone of despair: then, instantly recovering his self-possession by a violent effort, he said, "Sir Richard Stamford is in London!"

"Ah! then he is about to open the campaign against us," said Ramsey, a dark cloud coming over his handsome countenance, which was pale through recent illness and much anxiety. "He must be conscious of his power—he must possess some weapons which we do not suspect: or he would not venture in the metropolis, with the reward for his apprehension hanging over his head."

"Doubtless he has received from his wife a confession of all *she* knew," answered Martin, solemnly.

"No—no—I would stake my existence that she would not betray *me*," exclaimed Ramsey. "Having survived the blow which she inflicted on herself—and with every chance of recovering——"

"You are talking at random," interrupted Martin, impatiently. "She is dead!"

"Dead!" ejaculated Ramsey. "When did she die?—how have you learnt this fact?"

"She died the day before yesterday—early in the morning," answered Martin; "and the fact is recorded in the journals of this date."

"Then in her last moments may she have confessed!" murmured Ramsey. "Fool that I was to entrust her with so many of our secrets! But where did you see Sir Richard Stamford?—or how do you know that he is in London?"

"Because I *have* seen him," responded the senior partner. "I was coming out of a coffee-house in Blackman Street, Borough, where I had just read in the newspapers an account of Lady Stamford's death—when I saw Sir Richard Stamford enter a house not far from St. George's Church. He did not perceive me—and I waited about for some time to see if he came out again; as in that case, I should have knocked at the door and asked if he lived there. But he did not re-appear—and, my anxiety increasing to such a pitch that it became intolerable, I hastened hither to tell you what occurred."

"Well, at all events we have obtained a clue to his residence, or else to a house which he is in the habit of visiting," said Ramsey.

"An idea strikes me!" ejaculated Briggs. "It is of the utmost importance, for the plan which will be settled upon to-night, that we should find out whether the baronet *does* live at that house which you saw him enter. In any case, we must learn who and what the people are that live there: because, if we could obtain admission by fair means anyhow," he added, sinking his voice to a low and mysterious whisper, "we could do the work easy enough. What do you say?"

"Your plan is excellent," answered Ramsey. "But who can go and make the necessary inquiries? Some trustworthy and intelligent person——"

"Julia, you will undertake this mission?" interrupted Briggs, turning suddenly towards the young woman, who, though affecting to be leaning in a listless manner over the fire, had not lost a single word of the preceding conversation.

"What?" she exclaimed, raising her head and looking towards Briggs. "Did you speak to me?"

"Yes: I have something for you to do immediately:" then, putting money into her hand, he said, "You will go to the nearest stand and take a coach. Drive over into Blackman Street—and at a house which this gentleman," continued Briggs, pointing to Martin, "will describe to you, you must ascertain whether a certain Sir Richard Stamford lives there—and, if not, who does occupy the place. Endeavour to get into conversation with the servant, or the landlady—or whoever you may see——"

"I shall know how to manage it," observed Julia, in her quiet way. "Where is this house, sir?—and what number is it?"

Mr. Martin described the dwelling with accuracy.

"And you will be sure to return by twelve to-night at latest," said Briggs, impressively.

"I shall not fail you," answered Julia.

She then took her departure, and hastened to Tower Hill, whence a hackney-coach conveyed her over London Bridge to the lodgings which her husband and herself occupied in Blackman Street.

On ascending to the parlour she found Sir Richard Stamford in earnest conversation with Mr. Page: but the moment that she entered, they both turned looks of anxious inquiry upon her.

"I have succeeded—fully succeeded," observed Julia, as she laid aside her bonnet and cloak. "To-night the whole gang will be in your power—not even excepting Martin and Ramsey."

"God be thanked!" exclaimed the baronet, who was in deep mourning, and whose features were haggard and care-worn. "But how have you contrived, my good Mrs. Page, to ascertain sufficient to lead you to the adoption of this belief."

"We have already told you not to ask us how or by what means I could insinuate myself into the councils of those villains," replied Julia: "you see, sir, that when I suggested that it would be worth while for me to make the experiment, I was not far wrong. Ramsey is staying at Briggs's house, where he has been lying ill. Martin came in while I was there——"

"I knew that he was in London," exclaimed Sir Richard. "You see, Mr. Page, that the information I received at Aylesbury was quite correct."

"Mr. Martin came to report to Mr. Ramsey the circumstance of Lady Stamford's death, which he has read in the papers of this morning," continued Julia; "and they are now afraid that she may have made certain confessions to you."

"And their fears are justified," observed Sir Richard: "for, as I have already told you, my poor penitent wife avowed everything ere she breathed her last."

"What more have you ascertained, my dear?" demanded Page of his wife.

"Mr. Martin, on coming out of the coffee-shop," she replied, "saw Sir Richard Stamford enter this very house: and would you believe it—I am actually sent over as a spy to ascertain whether he lives here, and if not, who he comes to visit. Oh! you should have seen how well I kept my countenance while receiving these instructions and a description of the exterior of the house which I knew so much better than them."

"Excellent!" cried Page, rubbing his hands. "What more?"

"The villains are to hold a grand council to-night at twelve o'clock," continued Julia. "The Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Martin, and Ramsey will all be there—and your death, sir, will be resolved upon, I have no doubt from what the miscreants let drop," she added, turning towards the baronet.

"We will see how far they can succeed in their diabolical aims," observed Sir Richard. "Mrs. Page, I thank you most sincerely for the immense service which you have rendered me: but words are nothing—deeds shall prove my gratitude. Thank God! my affairs are far from being so desperate as I at first anticipated—and I shall be a wealthy man again. But my character must be thoroughly and completely cleared."

"It will be, my dear sir—it will be," exclaimed Page. "I told you so when we were in the dungeon together, and when you had not one tithe of the proofs of innocence which you possess now. But have you anything else to tell us, Julia my love?"

"Yes—one little incident," she answered. "I am to be back there, in Thacker's Court, by twelve o'clock, and report the results of my inquiries."

"Ah! we must see about that part of the business," said Page. "You're too useful and too precious, my dear, to put your life in jeopardy."

"I am not afraid," returned his wife, coolly; "and it may be that by going back to them again I can assist in their capture."

"This is a point on which Mr. Grumley must decide," said Page. "Let us now take a coach and be off to Bow Street. You are sure that Grumley will be there, Sir Richard?"

"When I explained in private to the magistrate this morning all the circumstances of my case, and the hope which I entertained of being enabled to place an entire gang of villains in the hands of justice," responded Sir Richard, "he ordered the head officer to remain at my disposal; and I made an appointment with the man to see him this evening."

"Ah! that's Grumley — Peter Grumley," said Page: "he's a famous thief-taker and very fond of a drop of drink, I believe. But we will be off now. Come, Julia dear, put on another gown and throw away that wretched rag."

"Not if I'm to go back to Briggs's house," answered the young woman. "It was my miserable appearance that helped me to make out such a good tale to the fellow that he really pitied me at one time. I will keep on this gown, and resume this old bonnet and cloak, in case of need."

"Well—just as you like," said Page. "Come—we have no time to lose."

And the trio sallied forth together, Mr. Page and Sir Richard having enveloped themselves in their cloaks, and Julia taking with her the latch-key belonging to the front door. A hackney-coach conveyed them to Bow Street, where they knocked at the private door of the Police-Office; and the summons was shortly answered by Mr. Peter Grumley himself. Sir Richard Stamford mentioned his name; and that functionary instantly conducted the party into a room where a candle was burning upon the table. A pewter-pot on the mantel-piece and the pipe which the famous thief-taker held in his hand, showed that he had been enjoying himself by the cheerful fire sparkling in the grate.

"Sit down," he said, as he closed the door of the dingy-looking and dirty apartment. "But I know you, my good sir," he exclaimed, fixing his eyes in a searching manner on the ex-traveller for the firm of Hodson and Morley: "your name's down in my books—and it's Page too. I recollect now. Ah! that little affair of our'n was a failur' some short time back," he added, sinking at the same moment into a huge black leathern chair studded with brass nails.

"But it shan't be a failure to-night, Mr. Grumley," observed Page: "and what's more, it's some of the very same people that we mean to put into your clutches."

"Ah! what—the Magsman?" said the thief-taker, puffing his pipe in a leisurely, comfortable manner, and then burying a considerable portion of his face in the pewter-pot.

"You've hit the right nail on the head, old fellow," exclaimed Mr. Page, chuckling and rubbing his hands gleefully.

"And who's this young o'oman?" asked Grumley, taking the pipe from his mouth and waving it towards Julia.

"My wife, sir—my wife, I beg to inform you," returned Page, drawing himself up in a stately manner. "But you musn't judge of her by the costume which she now wears. I admit that it is not elegant—I will allow that it is not becoming, Mr. Grumley: but let me tell you that it is assumed for a particular purpose," he added, placing his fore-finger slily against his nose, while his sharp countenance assumed a particularly sapient expression.

"Oh! I 'spose it's a plant, then?" observed the officer, with characteristic coolness, as he slowly rolled himself round in the huge chair so as to be enabled to enjoy a good long stare at Mrs. Page.

"A what did you say?" demanded the husband, bristling up under the impression that some insulting epithet had been applied to his wife.

"Now don't be a fool, Page," said Julia. "I know what he means. Yes, Mr. Grumley, it *is* a plant—a regular sell;—and without entering into any particulars, I must have you to know that I can insinuate myself when I choose into the company of the Magsman and his crew. I'm to be with them at midnight—or a little before: that is to say, if you think that by going amongst them I can do any good. If not, I shall of course stay away."

"Let's hear a little more about the matter, ma'am, if you please," observed the officer: then, withdrawing the pipe from his mouth and winking his right eye at Page, he added, "You ought to be proud of your good lady, sir—for she's a sharp 'un."

"Well, I am proud of her," said the ex-traveller. "She has managed this matter capitally as far as it goes. There 'll be the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Ramsey, and Martin, all assembled together to-night at twelve o'clock—a precious good haul of fish for your net, Mr. Grumley."

"And what are they going to deliberate on?" inquired the officer.

"The murder of Sir Richard Stamford," said Julia, answering the question, which was addressed to herself.

"Ah! a pleasant subject for discussion, no doubt," observed Grumley, as he coolly and quietly knocked the ashes out of his pipe and began to refill it: "but we'll see if we can't put a stopper upon them. What are you to go back for, Mrs. Page, at twelve o'clock?"

"Mr. Martin saw Sir Richard come to our house this afternoon; and I am actually employed as a spy to find out whether he lives there, and if he does not, what kind of people do. Because, as Briggs hinted,

if they could bribe those people to let them quietly into the house, they would make easy work of the matter. Now you understand all about it," added Julia, "and can tell me how to proceed."

Mr. Grumley smoked his pipe for several minutes in profound silence, looking up all the time in a thoughtful manner at the ceiling—just as if its blackness could possibly throw a light on the subject of his ruminations.

"There's two ways of going to work in this here business," said the officer at length. "One is for me and my people to make a regular assault on the premises in Thacker's Court, and take the whole gang prisoners: or else to separate them first by a strayty-jim——"

"A what?" demanded Page.

"A stratagem, my good friend—don't interrupt the constable," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

"And I prefer the last method," continued Mr Grumley; "because it will make the thing more surer. Now, ma'am," he said, turning towards Mrs. Page, "I'll tell 'ee what must be done. You'll go back a little while before twelve, and you'll pitch the rascals such a tale that some of 'em will set out to way-lay the baronet this very night. You must manage to accompany the party that's chosen to do the business; and some of my men will be on the look out at one end of the street from which Thacker's Court opens. They'll take care of the party that goes with you. Me and the rest of my people will be hidden close by the court—and when we've seen you and your companions go off, we shall know how to lay our hands on t'others that's left in the house. Now, do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered Julia. "I think you have decided on the best plan."

"Most assuredly," exclaimed Sir Richard. "I shall accompany you, Mr. Grumley."

"And so shall I," Mr. Page hastened to observe. "I've got my pistols about me on purpose."

"It's now ten o'clock, ma'am," said the officer, pulling out from his fob a huge silver watch which certainly was not smaller than a moderate-sized turnip and could not have weighed less than a couple of pounds avoirdupois.

"I will depart at once," observed Julia;—and Mr. Grumley politely escorted her to the front door of the Police Office.

"Now, then, Mobbs!" vociferated the officer at the top of his stentorian voice, as he returned along the passage into the room where he had left Page and the baronet; and, in obedience to this summons, a man of most repulsive exterior made his appearance from another part of the establishment.

"Well—what is it?" growled Mobbs, as he entered the room.

Mr. Grumley gave him a few hasty instructions relative to the taking a posse of constables down into the neighbourhood of Thacker's Court, and the manner in which he was to dispose of them in two parties; and the fellow, who seemed to relish the business, grinned knowingly and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"That's the best man I've got under me," observed Mr. Grumley, as soon as Mobbs had disappeared

"Well—one certainly must not judge by outward looks, in that case," said Mr. Page.

"One must be a fool who does," answered the officer, laconically. "That's as desperate a chap a you'd wish to meet in a summer day's walk. He'd think no more of cutting your throat from ear to ear than eatin' his dinner."

"Then I'd much rather not meet him at all in my summer rambles," observed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Ah! but I'm obleeged to employ such fellers," continued Grumley. "You heerd talk, may be, of the man which throwed his wife out of a three pair back and cut his child's head clean off, some five or six years ago, over the water yonder?" demanded the constable, waving his pipe in the direction of Lambeth.

"To be sure I did," exclaimed Page. "But what has that to do with your friend Mobbs?"

"Why, bless ye—he's the wery man," answered Grumley. "Your health, Sir Richard—my respects to you, Mr. Page;"—and he buried his countenance in the pewter-pot.

"You don't mean to say that you've got such a miscreant in your service, Mr. Grumley?" cried the ex-traveller, literally bounding on his seat.

"I tell ye you've just seen him," responded the officer, having finished his draught of porter. "There was two flaws in the indictment. One of 'em described the woman as being named Maria, whereas it was Mary; and t'other represented the murder to have been committed in the parish of Lambeth, whereas 'twas showed that half of the house stood in Lambeth and half in Southwark, and that it was in the Southwark half where the business took place. So the indictment was quashed—and our friend Mobbs got off. Then I took him into my service, where he's been ever since."

"But this must be a most extraordinary state of the law which allows such a wretch to escape with impunity on such miserable technicalities," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

"Lord bless ye," exclaimed Grumley: "that's nothink at all. There's a many chaps gets off twice as easy. Last Sessions I had a feller at the Old Bailey for prigging from his master, who was a 'bakkinist. The indictment charged him with feloniously stealing twenty pounds of cigars; and everything was as clear against him as possible. But when Counsellor Sharply got up for the defence, he demanded that the cigars should be brought into court. So they was—and they were found to be them kind that has straws in 'em. So the Counsellor orders all the straws to be taken out and has the cigars weighed; and then they prove to be less than eighteen pounds in weight. So he makes a fine speech for three hours and a half, arguing that the prisoner is accused of stealing twenty pounds' weight of cigars, and not twenty pounds' weight of cigars and straws. So the feller gets off."

"And this is really true?" exclaimed Page.

"As true as I'm sitting here," answered Grumley. "When I was a youngster, I was a sheriff's-officers' man—what's called a bum-bailiff. One day my master received a writ of *ca. sa.* to take the body of a genelman who'd died very much in debt, and whose executors wouldn't pay a mag of his liabilities. Well, my master and me went and stopped the funeral just as it was entering Paneras Church. Out jumps the chief executor from the black coach; and he says, says he, '*You're welcome to the body: but if you dare lay hand on coffin or shroud, or anything that the corpse is wrapped up in, we'll have our action against you.*'—So my master determined on

taking the body away naked in a hackney-coach: but up comes the solicitor for the executors and says, says he, '*Your powers as a sheriffs'-officer don't allow you to make a forcible entry. The lid of this coffin is the front door of the dead body's present residence; and you will break it open at your peril.*'—So my master saw the force of this reasoning and gave up the matter. There's technicalities for you."

"Very remarkable," exclaimed Page.

"Not so wery wonderful neither," resumed Mr. Grumley, "when compared with other things that I can tell you. There was my old friend Duggins, the horse-dealer. He was a twenty thousand pound man—and he made a will which said, '*I leave all my black and white horses to my eldest son Joshua Duggins; and the residue of my live stock I leave to my youngest son Samuel.*'—Now it seemed that some of the horses was black—others was white—and others was piebald, or black and white. Well, Joshua claims 'em all; and Samuel insists on having the piebalds. A law-suit takes place; and Joshua's counsel argues in this manner:—'*The black and white horses are clearly bequeathed to my client. He is entitled to the* black: *that is not denied. He is entitled to the* white: *that is also undisputed. Well, then, the will gives him the* black and white; *and therefore he must have the piebald.*'—The Court couldn't resist this reasonin'; and Joshua gets a judgment accordingly."

"This counsel deserved the verdict as a reward for his logic," observed Page, highly delighted with these anecdotes.

"I'll tell you a case that come off last Sessions at the Old Bailey," said Mr. Grumley. "One Bill Starks, a noted thief, was charged in the indictment for feloniously taking a diamond ear-ring from a lady's person. It seems he was togged as a swell-cove and sate next to her at the theatre, where the offence was committed in a moment when all the audience was greatly excited. But Counsellor Sharply pleaded in his defence that there was no robbery *from the person:* because when the prisoner unhooked the diamond drop from the lady's ear, it fell into her lap—and she, instantly perceiving what was done, gave him into custody. So the fact was that there was no *taking from the person* at all; and he was acquitted."

"Your stories get better and better, Mr. Grumley," said Page. "It's only half-past ten," he added, referring to his watch. "Have you got any more to tell us?"

"Lots," replied the constable. "But we must be jogging now—and I'll give you a few more anecdotes another time. Come, gentlmen."

Thus speaking, Mr. Peter Grumley rose from his seat; and, opening a cupboard, he took thence a rough and heavy upper-coat, into which he worked himself by innumerable contortions of his portly frame. In each of the two pockets he thrust a huge horse-pistol: he fastened a cutlass to his waist, so that it was concealed by the great thick coat when buttoned across his ample chest;—and grasping a stout club, he intimated by a familiar nod and a smile that his preparations were complete.

"Now we'll take a hackney-coach and be off," he observed. "My men, under Mobbs's orders, are already half-way there."

Mr. Grumley, Sir Richard Stamford, and Mr. Page sallied forth accordingly.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE RESULT.

SHORTLY before midnight the Magsman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, the Beggarman, Mr. Martin, and Mr. Ramsey were assembled in conclave at the house in Thacker's Court.

It was very evident, by the manner of the parties, that a reconciliation had taken place between Ramsey and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff: in fact, it was indispensable to the interests of the former to forgive, though he might not forget, the murderous attempt made upon him on the river;—and it was owing to the intervention of the Magsman that the affair had been thus patched up.

"Well," said the formidable Joseph Warren, who might be looked on as the president of this council of iniquity, "we can resolve upon nothing until Julia Lightfoot returns. It was fortunate that she happened to be here at the time, Briggs—or you would have had no one to send on this business, and the night would have been lost."

"Here she is!" exclaimed the man to whom the latter remark was addressed: for at the moment a low knock at the front door was heard.

In less than a minute Julia found herself in the presence of the miscreants thus assembled in solemn conclave; and she was welcomed by the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, and the Gallows' Widow as an old acquaintance. Believing, too, that she was sincere in her wish to join them, they congratulated her upon the resolution which she had formed to that effect.

"And now what news, young woman?" demanded Ramsey, as she took her seat at the table.

"Sir Richard Stamford lives at the house to which I was sent," she replied, without the least indication of embarrassment. "He has lodged there since yesterday, and is in and out a great deal. I pretended to be a poor servant out of place, and got into conversation with the landlady. It happens that she requires a maid-of-all-work just at the present time; and I gave her a reference to some fictitious person and feigned address."

"Good," murmured the Gallows' Widow, with that inward kind of low chuckle which was more dreadful to hear than the boistcrous mirth of the wildest orgie.

"Sir Richard went out while I was there," continued Julia. "He is a tall, stoutish man, of commanding appearance, and very handsome—wears hessian boots and a short cloak."

"Exactly so!" cried Martin. "You have tracked him to his kennel—and he shall not escape us."

"As he was going out," resumed Mrs. Page, "he asked the landlady for a latch-key, saying that he should not be home again until between two and three in the morning, as he had a consultation with some Bow Street runners to attend——"

"Ah! I told you that the warfare had begun!" exclaimed Ramsey. "He has been collecting his proofs—and now he has fairly opened the campaign. What next, young woman?"

"The landlady gave him the latch-key," proceeded Julia; "but as he took it from her hand, it fell upon the pavement and rolled towards the gutter. We were all three standing close by the threshold of the door when this happened. I officiously stooped down

to look for the key—and indeed I found it immediately. But I pretended not to be able to find it, and secreted it in my dress while still groping about in the mud. At length the search was abandoned—and, the landlady having promised to sit up till two for the baronet, he thanked her and took his departure. He seems a generous man—for he gave me half-a-crown for my trouble in searching after the key."

"This is better than we could have expected!" exclaimed the Magsman. You have managed admirably, Julia. Where is the key?"

"Here," she answered, handing him the object of his inquiry.

The reader scarcely requires to be informed that Julia acted in this manner with regard to the latch-key in order to support the statement which she had been making; and in that aim she fully succeeded.

"Now, how many people live in the house where you have been?" demanded the Magsman.

"The landlady is there alone at present," was the reply. "She is without a servant—and she was complaining bitterly to me about the badness of the times, observing that Sir Richard Stamford was the only lodger she had, and that she had two floors to let."

"Our course is as easy and plain as it well can be," observed the Magsman. "Briggs, the Beggarman, me, and Julia will go over there without delay. We shall want Julia to show us the right house, so that there may be no infernal mistake. The latch-key will admit us—and we shall bind and gag the landlady. When Sir Richard knocks at the door, Julia will open it. He will readily believe that she is the new servant, after seeing her there this evening. The rest will be managed quietly enough."

"Then I shall stay here till you return, Joe," said the Gallows' Widow.

"Certainly: and so will our two friends here," added the man, glancing towards Martin and Ramsey. "There's plenty of lush in the cupboard—isn't there, Briggs?"

"Plenty," was the answer.

"And you can therefore make yourselves comfortable," said the Magsman, addressing himself to his mistress and the two partners. "Come—we'll be off. There's not much time to lose."

Thus speaking, the villain rose from his seat; and drawing a pistol from each pocket in his coat, he assured himself that the weapons were primed and ready for use. This example was followed by the Big Beggarman, who was equally well armed; while Briggs put on his own upper-garment and likewise secured a brace of pistols about his person.

Julia could not avoid shuddering as she beheld those menacing instruments: for the thought flashed to her mind, that should her treachery be suspected at the moment when the attack was made on the party, a bullet from one of the weapons might be the only recompense she was likely to obtain from the adventure. But she had gone too far to retract; and, instantly summoning all her courage, which was by no means trivial, to her aid, she prepared to accompany the three villains.

But the lynx eyes of the Gallows' Widow had noticed that cold tremor which had passed over her, evanescent as it was;—and advancing straight up to her, she fixed a piercing look upon her countenance, saying, "You are afraid, Julia!"

"Not a whit," was the calm and firm response, while the gaze was met as steadily and unflinchingly.

"What's the matter, Lizzy?" demanded the Magsman.

"Julia trembled—that's all," replied the woman, in a tone indicative of suspicion.

"I don't think I did," said Mrs. Page, with a voice and manner that bespoke confidence: "but if I did, it was because I might not at the moment feel exactly comfortable respecting the work which those pistols are perhaps destined to perform before morning."

"I'm sorry if I wronged you, Julia," said the Gallows' Widow, her suspicions now subsiding. "But as no one amongst us ever trembles through fear, I thought it must be through some other cause."

"If you suspect me of any evil intent, you'd better go and personate the servant yourself," exclaimed Julia, with well-affected indignation. "It's too bad when I've done all I could, and have been praised for what I have done, to be insulted in this manner."

"Come, come—be friends, you women," growled the Magsman, impatiently. "You're too suspicious, Lizzy—and you're too timid, Julia."

"Remember that affair of Page, the commercial traveller," said the Gallows' Widow; "and then tell me that I am too suspicious. However, I don't want to be unjust towards Julia—and I therefore now declare to her that I am satisfied."

"Oh! I am not vindictive," exclaimed Julia "You are right to be on your guard. But time will show whether I am to be trusted or not. Here's my hand, Mrs. Warren."

"And here's mine, Julia," responded the Gallows' Widow.

She held Mrs. Page's hand in her own for nearly a minute; and finding that it trembled not, her suspicions were completely lulled.

This little scene, which for a moment appeared to menace Julia with a terrible danger, having taken place, glasses of raw spirit were handed round; and the Beggarman, Briggs, the Magsman, and Mrs. Page issued forth together.

The night was very dark; and the rain was now falling heavily. So silent were the court and the street into which it led, that Julia felt assured the sounds of the men's heavy footsteps would give the constables ample warning of their approach, wherever those functionaries might be concealed.

Briggs and the Beggarman went a little way in advance: the Magsman and Julia walked side by side a few paces in their rear. Not a word was spoken;—and they proceeded at a rapid rate.

But just at the moment when the little party were turning the corner at the end of the street, Briggs and the Beggarman were suddenly seized upon by four constables, who overpowered them in an instant.

"Treachery, by God!" vociferated the Magsman; and, as the words fell from his lips, he aimed a tremendous blow at Julia with the butt-end of one of his pistols.

But she glided away the instant that the scuffle in front met her ears;—and the next moment the Magsman was pinioned from behind, by the strong grasp of Mobbs himself, while another official passed a noose over his neck, which, falling round his body outside his arms, fastened them to his sides and rendered him thus far powerless.

"Damnation!" roared the Magsman, flinging himself on the ground, and bestowing three or four kicks of savage ferocity on the constables by whom he was environed.

But they speedily mastered him; and he was borne to a hackney-coach, which was waiting in an adjacent street, and in which the Big Beggarman and Briggs were already securely deposited.

Mobbs and two other constables entered the vehicle; and the prisoners received a very plain and unceremonious intimation from the official first named, that the slightest attempt at resistance or escape would be followed by the blowing out of the offender's brains.

The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman vented their rage in sullen oaths; and the coach drove rapidly away towards Clerkenwell Prison.

We must now return to the Gallows' Widow, Ramsey, and Martin, whom we left at the house in Thacker's Court.

Scarcely had the front-door closed behind the expeditionary party, when a feeling of uneasiness began to creep over the Magsman's mistress. A sort of presentiment appeared to tell her that her friends were betrayed. Julia's conduct recurred to her mind, accompanied with suspicions which every instant grew stronger; and yet she endeavoured to wrestle against them, and persuade herself that these fears were only imaginary.

"You appear uneasy," said Ramsey and Martin, both giving utterance to the same observation at the same moment; and they surveyed her with all the acute-suspense inseparable from a consciousness of guilt.

"I don't like this business at all," answered the Gallows' Widow. "I wish we had never undertaken it. Why couldn't you have managed your own affairs without coming to us?" she demanded in a savage tone, a sinister light flashing in her eyes.

"Now don't be angry, my dear young woman," said Ramsey, who, as well as his partner, had caught the infection of her augmenting terrors. "But tell us what you fear?—what is there to apprehend?" he demanded hurriedly.

"Julia Lightfoot's manner haunts me," answered the Gallows' Widow, with a vehemence quite unusual on her part. "But I will just follow them a little distance—I dare say that my fears are groundless——nevertheless——"

"We will go with you," said Ramsey, trembling at the idea of being thus left in a house which treachery might invade with constables at any moment.

"And I also," exclaimed Martin. "Have you any weapons?"

"None," responded the Gallows' Widow. "But you can do no good, and will only draw attention to me if there's any foul play going on in the street. Stay here—I command you," she exclaimed, with as much imperiousness as if she were a queen dictating to the servile courtiers who are ever ready to kiss the toe of Royalty.

"Well—we will stay, then," said Martin, in order to propitiate the woman of whom he began to be afraid.

"If there's any treachery intended, it will be executed close by," observed the Gallows' Widow, now resuming her naturally mild and subdued tone: "for the Bow Street runners would as soon do their work in this neighbourhood as by enticing our friends over into the Borough. I shall not therefore go far—and I hope to return in a few minutes."

With these words, she quitted the house.

Along the court hastened the Gallows' Widow: she emerged into the street—strained her eyes to penetrate the darkness as she looked up and down—and, perceiving nothing to alarm her, hurried on in the same direction which her friends had taken five minutes previously.

All was quiet: for, in truth, the short but energetic struggle between the three miscreants and the constables was already over, and they were by this time safe in the hackney-coach, as ere now stated.

Suddenly the sounds of light footsteps approaching, fell on the ears of the Gallows' Widow. She stood up in the dark shade of a door-way—and a female passed hurriedly by. It was Julia, who, having watched from a little distance the success of the constables and the discomfiture of the three villains, was retracing her way up the street to endeavour to find where Grumley's corps, with her husband and Sir Richard Stamford, was concealed.

The keen eyes of the Gallows' Widow instantly recognised the young woman, who in a moment felt a hand clutch her by the shoulder.

"Where are you going?" demanded the former in a resolute voice.

So completely unexpected was the appearance of the Gallows' Widow, and so abrupt was this question, that Julia was now really confused and embarrassed; and her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth.

"What has happened?—why are you alone?—speak!" exclaimed the woman, whose desperate character, in spite of her reserved manners and habitually subdued tone, was no secret to Mrs. Page.

"You have no right to question me," responded the latter; and, bursting away, she flew along the street—the Gallows' Widow pursuing her with an equal agility.

The entrance of the court was gained: but Julia was passing it rapidly by, when the Gallows' Widow succeeded in overtaking her.

"Now you shall answer me—or I will dash your brains out against the wall!" cried the infuriate woman, flinging herself upon Julia with the rage and force of a tigress.

The violence of the assault, which Mrs. Page turned round to resist, brought them both to the ground; but at the same moment the trampling of many feet were heard—and in another instant Grumley's detachment, headed by this official himself, appeared upon the spot.

"What the devil's all this?" ejaculated Mr. Page, recognising his wife by her voice—for it was too dark to catch a glimpse of her features—and Julia was crying for help.

"Wretch!" shrieked the Gallows' Widow, dashing the young woman's head upon the pavement; then, suddenly starting up, she bounded away, leaving her shawl in the hands of Grumley who had fixed his iron grasp upon her.

Two of the constables rushed off in full pursuit; while Mr. Page raised his wife, who, though for a few moments partially stunned by the blow which she had received, soon recovered her senses.

"The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman are captured," she hastened to observe: "and Ramsey and Martin are alone in the house. At least I should think that they must be there still," she added.

"At all events we will lose no time in entering the place," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford.

"Come along," said Mr. Grumley — and the party turned into the court.

Mr. Grumley did not adopt the useless ceremony of knocking at the door: but, throwing his herculean form with all his force against it, he burst it open in a moment. He then rushed into the back room, guided by the light which peered from beneath the door of the chamber; and Ramsey and Martin suddenly found themselves in the power of a posse of constables.

"We are lost!" exclaimed the elder banker, clasping his hands, and sinking back on the chair from which he had sprung when the first evidence of the assault upon the house had met his ears.

"Ah! our enemy!" ejaculated Ramsey, catching sight of the tall form of Sir Richard Stamford in the door-way.

"Now, mind, genelmen," cried Grumley, "anythink you say here will be used against you elsewhere, according to the stattit in that case made and purwided. The game's all up, I can tell you: your accomplices is in the hands of my man Mobbs —and you'll all sleep to-night in Clerkenwell."

"We will attempt no resistance," said Ramsey: "but pray remove us with as little noise as possible. There's no use in arousing the whole neighbourhood."

"Come along quiet, then," returned Grumley. "As for me, I'm a perfect lamb of an officer when genelmen behave as such: but if they tip me any of their nonsense, I precious soon become as queer a customer to deal with as a lion rampant."

What Mr. Grumley's ideas of a lion rampant might be, we cannot pretend to guess. The warning was not however lost upon the two bankers, who submitted without the slightest attempt at resistance to the disagreeable process of handcuffing which now took place.

"May I be allowed to say a word to Sir Richard Stamford in private?" asked Mr. Martin, in an imploring tone.

"Not very well," responded Grumley.

"Nor should I consent to the proposition, were it admissible," said the baronet, with a voice and manner which too plainly indicated that his partners had no mercy to expect at his hands.

"You are here to triumph over us at last, Sir Richard," observed Ramsey, in a tone of hateful malignity.

"No, sir—I am here to aid the officers of justice in securing two offenders against the sacred rights of private friendship and the public laws of society," was the calm and deliberate answer.

At this moment the two constables who had set off in pursuit of the Gallows' Widow, made their appearance with the intimation that she had succeeded in effecting her escape.

"Well, it can't be helped," observed Grumley, taking the announcement with the phlegmatic coolness peculiar alike to the man and to his office. "We've got five Gallows' Birds—and so we may manage to do without the Gallows' Widow," he, added, chuckling at his own joke.

The subordinate constables laughed also, as in duty bound towards their superior; and the whole party then moved away from the house.

But Mr. Ramsey's fears relative to the arousing of the neighbourhood were fully justified by the appearance of the court when they all emerged into it. The inhabitants of the dwellings, alarmed by the bursting open of the door, had crowded to the threshold—many of them holding candles in their hands in order to ascertain what was going on;—and when the prisoners, the constables, Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia, issued from the house, a general buzz and murmur of voices indicated the curiosity which was experienced on all sides.

Ramsey and Martin held down their heads as they passed rapidly along the court, now completely illuminated by the candles at the doors and the light streaming from the open windows:—and bitterly—bitterly, in the depths of their souls, did they repent the hour when they first stepped aside from the path of rectitude and honour.

"There's been a precious smash up there in Briggs's house," observed one of the spectators to another.

"Ah! and many will be implicated, I'll be bound," was the response.

"Officer," exclaimed the first speaker, "what's the number of chaps taken?"

"Five on 'em," answered Grumley, who was somewhat proud of the night's achievement.

"And they're sure to be all scragged!" cried the querist, in a tone expressive of joy. "I say, Bill," he added, turning towards his neighbour, "wont it be a precious lark to see five on 'em tucked up at one time. We ain't had such a treat for the last six months. Ah! George the Third's the King for hanging up his subjects in half-dozens and dozens! A nice Father of his People he is—ain't he, Bill?"

The answer that was given to this remark, did not reach the ears of the two prisoners: for at that moment the party turned from the court into the street. But Ramsey and Martin shuddered from head to foot as those awfully prophetic words, relative to the hanging, flippant though the manner of their utterance might have been, struck like a knell upon their startled ears.

Two hackney-coaches had been provided by the officers for this night's work: one had already departed with its freight for Clerkenwell Prison—and the second now received the two bankers, together with Grumley and a couple of runners.

Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia departed in one direction, while the vehicle took another; and in due course Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey were lodged in the gaol whither the Magsman, Briggs, and the Big Beggarman had preceded them.

For in the times of which we are writing, the system of retaining prisoners in the custody of the constables until after the examination before a magistrate, was not an invariable practice, and individuals charged with serious offences were usually conveyed at once to a prison.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE MANŒUVRING MILLINER.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning following the night of adventures just related; and Mrs. Brace awoke from a pleasant dream in her downy bed. Hastily referring to her watch, which lay upon a little table close at hand, she discovered that she had somewhat over-slept herself; and, rising from her couch, she thrust her feet into a pair of slippers, put on a dressing-gown, and drew back the window curtains. The pavement of Pall Mall looked white and frosty—for the weather was intensely cold: but reckless of the freezing air, the handsome milliner proceeded to comb out her long black tresses—and when she had performed this portion of her toilette, she entered an adjoining room, in which there was a large bath filled with water.

Laying aside her vesture, Mrs. Brace unhesitatingly plunged into the bath—the thin ice which covered the surface of the water, breaking with a sharp crackling sound into a myriad pieces as the robust form of the lady thus broke through it.

For a few instants her teeth chattered; for the water was cold—piercingly, bitterly cold: but this sensation speedily passed away—and as she rubbed herself all over with her hands, a glow of warmth was suffused throughout her entire frame. In three or four minutes she emerged from the bath; and then the rapid friction of large coarse towels augmented that genial heat—and while her cheeks became animated with the ruddy tinge of health, her neck, shoulders, bosom, and limbs appeared polished, white, and dazzling as alabaster.

Resuming the slight attire which she had put off, Mrs. Brace returned to her bed-room—arranged her hair in negligent curls, which showered down her back—performed her ablutions with scented soap—and used a costly pearl-powder for her teeth. Having thus beautified herself, she put on a becoming cap, and retired again to her couch.

Almost immediately afterwards Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room, and appeared surprised to find that her mistress was not up and dressed.

"I am somewhat indisposed this morning," said Mrs. Brace; "and shall take my breakfast in bed. By the bye, Lord Florimel will call a little before nine o'clock: but he may come to me here—as I know that he wishes to see me on some important business."

"Very good, ma'am," returned the abigail; and she quitted the room.

In a few minutes Harriet reappeared, carrying a massive silver tray, on which the milliner's morning repast was spread. The chocolate was steaming in a silver pot—the boiled milk was contained in a cream-jug of the same metal—and a round of toast, made with great care, was kept warm by the plate being placed over a basin of hot water. In fact, had Mrs. Brace been a Duchess, it was impossible to serve her with a more delicate attention.

Harriet retired—and the milliner was half-reclining on the large downy pillows, sipping her chocolate, when Lord Florimel made his appearance.

Throwing aside his cloak and hat, the young nobleman approached the bed, saying, "My dear friend, I am quite chagrined to hear of your indisposition. What is the matter with you?—and when were you taken ill?"

"I awoke with a dreadful head-ache—but it will pass away presently," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming the languid tone and looks of an invalid. "You must excuse me, my dear Florimel, for receiving you in my bed-chamber——"

"It is not the first time I have set my foot in this sanctuary," interrupted the nobleman, with a sly smile.

"True," observed Mrs. Brace: "it was here that you dressed yourself in lady's attire, preparatory to the little adventure with Miss Pauline Clarendon."

"You mistake, my dear friend," said Florimel. "I did not dress myself—it was you that performed the duties of abigail on my behalf."

"And I remember you were so naughty all the time that I had the greatest difficulty in lacing your stays and hooking your gown," returned the milliner.

"I must admit that I snatched a kiss or two while you were thus engaged, my dear friend," observed Florimel: "but I was a very wicked fellow then. Now, as you are well aware, I am thoroughly altered—and indeed, I may be safely trusted in any lady's bed-chamber in the universe."

"Still in the same sentimental mood, my lord?" exclaimed the milliner, smiling archly in spite of her affected indisposition. "A few weeks have made a marvellous alteration in you."

"But Pauline is so beautiful—so truly beautiful!" cried the young nobleman, with an unfeigned enthusiasm; "and she is so amiable—so good—so gentle—so virtuous——"

"I have not a doubt of it," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "But shall you always remain faithful to her? Think you that, when you are married to her, you will never go astray?"

"I am too much a man of the world to believe in the existence of such constancy on the part of one of my own sex," responded Florimel, gravely: "but this I do declare and believe—that years will elapse before temptation can become sufficiently strong to render me faithless to Pauline. At all events, I shall strive to merit her good opinion—I shall endeavour by my conduct to deserve her;—and you may depend upon it, my dear friend, that if I had not known you for a considerable time, I should not have ventured up into your bed-chamber on this occasion."

"Then you consider me to be no one?" said Mrs. Brace, pouting her lips in so ravishing a manner that Lord Florimel could not help thinking to himself how remarkably handsome the milliner was looking.

"You misunderstand me altogether," he exclaimed. "I consider you to be a very dangerous creature," he added, smiling, "on account of your beautiful person and your fascinating manners."

"Well—I am glad to see that your lordship can pay a compliment, in spite of the sentimentalism which has taken so firm a hold upon you;"—and Mrs. Brace smiled also—but it was to display her brilliant teeth to the best advantage.

"Oh! I am not unmindful of the claims of other ladies upon my admiration," said Florimel; "but then, I have acquired strength sufficient to enable me to resist all temptations. As I was observing, however, I look upon you so much in the light of a sincere friend, that I do not hesitate to venture into your bed-chamber. Were it otherwise, I should not have come hither—even if you were only a quarter as handsome as you really are. And permit me to

observe that, considering your indisposition, you *look* uncommonly well: your cheeks are animated with a healthy glow—and your eyes sparkle brilliantly."

"I am slightly feverish, perhaps," said Mrs. Brace.

"On the contrary, you are quite cool," returned Florimel, after a pause, during which he had taken her hand. "But tell me, my dear friend," he continued,—"what is the nature of this important business concerning which you desired to see me?"

"I will explain it," said Mrs. Brace, throwing herself back upon the pillows, and stretching her robust white arms beneath her head in such a manner that the movement drew aside the folds of her night-dress, thus displaying to the eyes of the young nobleman more of the bosom than modesty should have allowed to be revealed. "Yesterday evening," she resumed, as if quite unconscious of the act just recorded, "a young lady, dressed in deep mourning, called upon me. It appears that she has very recently lost both her parents—under what circumstances she did not inform me; and she was so completely overwhelmed with grief, when speaking of them, that I dared not ask her. Since that period, however, she has been meditating seriously upon the course of life which she ought to adopt in order to earn a livelihood. The poor creature possesses a few hundred pounds: but she does not wish to exist in idleness upon a sum of money which must sooner or later be exhausted. Being skilful with her needle, she thought of turning that talent to advantage; and, having procured a list of the principal millinery establishments in London, she resolved to apply to them for work. As accident ordained, mine was the very first house whereat she called; and I made immediate arrangements with her. This evening she takes up her abode beneath my roof."

"Ah! my dear Mrs. Brace, I begin to understand—nay, more—I *do* comprehend the object for which you have sent for me," exclaimed Florimel, in a reproachful tone: "but I dare not—no—I dare not—— I am proof against temptation."

"At all events, my good friend, I lost no time in making you acquainted with the circumstance," said Mrs. Brace. "The moment the young lady took her departure, I despatched a note to your lordship's mansion."

"Our past connexion, and the nature of it, render me grateful to you for this preference," observed the nobleman: "but again I say, I dare not! No—I have at length obtained a formal introduction to my Pauline—I have passed in her society, at the house of a mutual friend, one of the most delicious evenings of my life—I saw her adorning the ball-room, radiant in her youthful beauty and matchless in elegance and grace—and I could not prove unfaithful to her. Believe me, my dear friend, I really love and adore Pauline Clarendon—and I should hate myself, were I to forget the vows which I have pledged to her, and the oaths which I have secretly taken within the depths of my own heart."

"It is not for me to tempt you to break those vows," said Mrs. Brace; and by another movement, skilfully executed and having all the air of negligence, she still further bared her bosom, until one round swelling globe was completely revealed and the eye could embrace more than half of the other. "At the same time," she continued, "I must inform you, my dear friend, that never have you seen a more charming creature than the young lady who is to take up her abode beneath my roof to-night. She is not more than sixteen—the very age which you most admire; and her form is a perfect model of symmetry and grace. Her eyes are a fine dark blue, melting and tender;—her hair is a deep brown, lustrous with a rich gloss;—and no lily can compare with the whiteness of her skin. You know that I am a good judge of beauty in my own sex, Florimel—and I can assure you that this angelic girl of whom I am speaking, is far superior to any whom you have ever beheld in this house."

"Do not say any more upon the subject," exclaimed Florimel, whose passions were inflamed not only by the picture which Mrs. Brace had drawn of the fair unknown, but likewise by the contemplation of her own charms: for the young nobleman found it almost impossible to withdraw his gaze from that breast of snow which was thus revealed to him in all its full, ample, and voluptuous proportions.

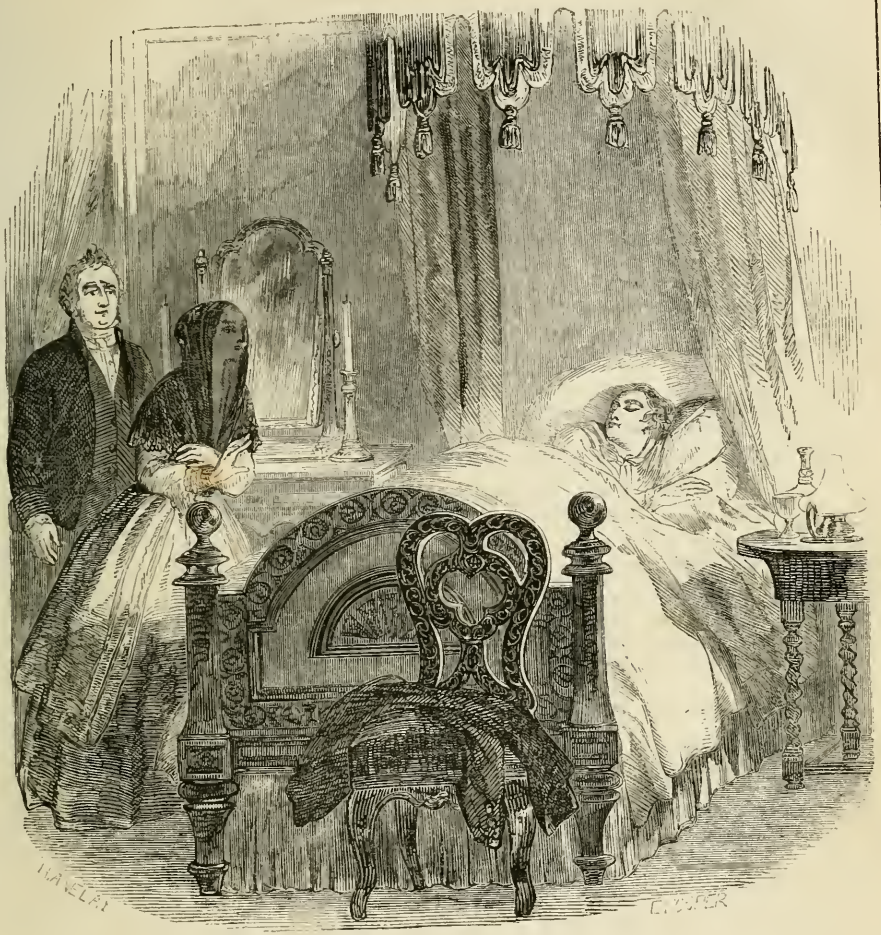
"Now listen to me, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, turning her countenance upon him, and assuming her most witching looks: "you love Pauline—you have sworn to be faithful to her. But was not the vow somewhat rashly made?—and will it not be difficult to keep? Months must elapse before you can marry her: for the sake of decency in reference to the usages of the world, you cannot propose to her—or rather admit that you have proposed to her—under six or eight weeks. Then her father will have to be consulted. Of course he will consent to the match; but it would be unseemly to a degree and indelicately precipitate to fix a very early day for the bridal. As I have observed, therefore, some months will intervene ere you lead your beloved Pauline to the altar; and, during that period, must you remain an anchorite? I cannot believe that you will;—and I do not consider that Pauline herself has a right to make such an exaction. When once you are her husband, she may then have a right to demand an account of your proceedings: but in the interval you are still your own master, free and independent."

"I comprehend all the speciousness of your reasoning—and yet I can scarcely resist it," murmured Florimel, in a subdued tone. "Oh! my dear friend," he exclaimed, suddenly starting from the chair which he had occupied close to the bed; "do not tempt me—I implore you not to undermine the good resolutions that I have formed. My Pauline *has* a right to my constancy—*has* a claim upon my fidelity! The peculiar circumstances under which our acquaintance was formed——"

"Will prevent her from giving you the credit which your constancy and fidelity would assuredly deserve," added Mrs. Brace.

"I dare not remain to hear you argue thus, my dear friend," cried Florimel: then, seizing her hand, and pressing it warmly, he said, "I cannot find it in my heart to reproach you—although you really deserve vituperation from my lips. But I have a sincere friendship for you—I would do anything I could to serve you—and you know it. Show me, therefore, some gratitude in return—and tempt me not."

"My dear Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, pressing his hand against her bosom, as if it were an involuntary act—or rather one prompted by the fervour of grateful feelings,—"I am aware of your kind and generous sentiments in my behalf—and I thank you sincerely—Oh! most sincerely! For I have always been fond of you from the first moment that



we met—and—and—to tell you the truth, Florimel——But, no—it would be ridiculous on my part——"

And Mrs. Brace burst into tears.

"My dear creature," exclaimed the young nobleman, throwing his arm round her neck; "what, in the name of heaven, is the matter with you? Have I said or done aught to afflict you? If so, I declare most solemnly that nothing was farther from my intention. Speak—tell me—leave off weeping——"

"Oh! you will despise me—you will laugh at me, Florimel!" murmured the handsome but crafty milliner, drawing him towards her in such a manner that his cheek rested against her own.

"I am incapable of treating a friend with ridicule," said the nobleman; and he felt her bosom throbbing and heaving beneath his hand. "Tell me—what would you have me understand?"

"That I love you," answered Mrs. Brace, in a tone of melting tenderness.

"Alas! this is most unfortunate," said Florimel, his voice expressing commiseration: "for you are well aware that my heart is devoted to Pauline——"

"Think not, my lord," interrupted the milliner "that I was insane—mad—rabid enough to suppose that you could *love* me in return—*me*, who am so many years older than yourself. But you have toyed with me at times—you have caressed me—you have complimented me. How could I do otherwise than conceive an affection for you—*you*, who are so eminently handsome? Oh! there *was* no favour—there *is* none—which you might not have demanded of me, with the certainty of its being accorded!"

And, as she thus spoke, Mrs. Brace wound her arms around the nobleman's neck and fastened her lips to his.

Now, in spite of all his excellent resolutions—his vows—and his sincere intention of remaining faithful to Pauline Clarendon, Lord Florimel was

placed in a situation which afforded an opportunity that could scarcely be resisted. And the reader must make all possible allowances for him, if his firmness did rapidly ebb away. For there he was—encircled in the warm and tender embrace of an amorous woman, who was strikingly handsome,—a woman who, although in the meridian of her life, nevertheless appeared several years younger, inasmuch as care and attention had wonderfully preserved her charms,—a woman, therefore, who possessed all the attractions of a young girl, combined with the dangerous fascinations of an accomplished syren.

Alas! we must confess that Florimel was on the point of surrendering—was on the very verge of suffering himself to be seduced by that artful and voluptuous creature, as if *he* were the coy young woman and *she* was the experienced man of mature age,—yes, he was about to yield to the opportunity, the place, and the temptation,—when his good genius interposed. Or was it for thy sweet sake, O innocent and beauteous Pauline! that some propitious power manifested its saving influence at that moment when the vows pledged to thee were on the point of being lost in perjury?

We know not: suffice it to say that at the instant when Mrs. Brace was about to triumph and Lord Florimel to succumb, a hasty knock was heard at the door of her chamber.

The young nobleman burst from the arms of the milliner, who instantly threw herself back upon the pillows, drawing her vesture over her palpitating bosom: then, in a voice as composed and collected as she could render it, she exclaimed, "Come in!"

Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room bearing a letter.

"I shall now say farewell," cried Lord Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at this providential interruption: for a sudden revulsion of feeling had revived all his good resolutions in a moment. "I see that you have business to attend to, my dear friend," he added: then, having pressed her hand, he hurried away, regardless of the look which she cast to implore him to remain.

"From whom does this note come?" demanded the disappointed and enraged milliner, scarcely able to subdue an inclination to wreak her spite and annoyance upon the abigail.

"A young woman, dressed in widow's weeds, brought it, ma'am," was the answer. "I should not have intruded until you were disengaged, but that she said the letter was of the utmost importance to you as well as to others."

"Strange!—whom can it be from?" murmured Mrs. Brace. "Is the person waiting?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I'm inclined to think that there's something strange about her—for the moment I opened the street-door, she rushed in and shut the door again of her own accord, just for all the world as if she was afraid of being seen coming here, or as if some one was watching her outside."

"Wait an instant," said Mrs. Brace, a vague misgiving seizing her: for, as she turned the soiled and ill-folded letter over in her hand, she could not help associating it in some way or another with her husband, the Magsman.

At length mustering up courage to open it, she saw that the contents were written in a scrawling female hand, as was also the address outside; and, with a sinking of the heart and a changing countenance, she perused the following lines:—

"MADAM,— Fearful that when you hear a stranger wanted to speak to you at this early hour, you might send down a message to say you was engaged, or something of that sort, I take the liberty of sending you this note while I wait for your answer. I want you to see me at once and without delay; because I've something of the greatest importance to tell you about Joe Warren, and something or another that you must do, since he is in trouble and I'm unable to help him as I could wish. So if you want to avoid bother and exposure and all that, you'll be so good as to see me in private at once; and if not, I shall know what to think and how to act. But I mean no offence, only to let you see that I'm firm.

"Your humble servant,

"ELIZABETH MARKS."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, saw that her mistress changed colour and grew considerably agitated as she read the note: for indeed Mrs. Brace was utterly unable to conceal, much less subdue, the painful emotions which its contents excited in her bosom.

"You may conduct the woman hither," she said, in a low and hoarse tone.

The abigail withdrew; and the milliner instantly rose, slipped on her dressing-gown, and seated herself in a chair near the toilette-table to await the coming of this most unwelcome visitress.

The colour had completely fled from her cheeks, which, though retaining all their natural plumpness, were now ghastly in appearance: for the voluptuous thoughts and libidinous ideas which so recently filled her bosom, giving animation to her fine countenance, had been suddenly dispersed, like chaff upon the whirlwind, by the incident that had broken in on her guilty pleasures.

Presently the door opened; and a young woman in widow's weeds was introduced by Harriet, who immediately retired, leaving her mistress alone with the stranger.

"Sit down," said the milliner, in a suffocating tone, as she pointed to a chair; "and now tell me what has occurred—who you are—and what you require of me."

"In the first place, ma'am," said the Gallows' Widow—for she it was,—"Joseph Warren was arrested last night—and he's in prison now. Secondly, I suppose there's no offence in my telling you that I'm his very particular friend——"

"I understand you, young woman. Go on!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"Thirdly, then, I want you to do a certain something which I can't explain in a moment, and which will help him to get out of gaol as comfortable as possible," added the Gallows' Widow: "or else he'll be hung, to a certainty."

The milliner shuddered—not so much at the idea of the probable fate of the Magsman, but at the thought that she should have the misfortune to be so closely linked to such a wretch.

"Ah! you may well be shocked, ma'am," observed the Gallows' Widow, on whom the tremor which thus convulsed the entire frame of Mrs. Brace was not lost: "it would indeed be an awful thing for you to know that your own husband was hung up like a dog."

"Spare your comments, young woman," said the milliner, in a stifling voice. "I see that you know all—everything?" she added, fixing a searching look upon her.

"Yes: all—everything," responded the Gallows'

Widow. "Warren has no secrets from me. I am acquainted with his adventure here—in this very house—one Sunday night, when the Prince of Wales was hid behind the curtain——"

"Hush!" murmured Mrs. Brace, putting her forefinger to her quivering lip: "I do indeed perceive that you know all. But on what charge has this unhappy man been arrested?"

"Rather inquire, madam, upon what charge he has *not* been arrested," said the Gallows' Widow, emphatically. "There is no use in mincing matters with you. He is sure to be hanged if he don't escape—and I can't help him. In fact, I should be made a prisoner myself if I was seen by any of the runners—and it was in a sort of desperation that I came to you now. These clothes," she added, glancing down at her dress, "are quite enough to betray me: but I don't dare go near the place where I live to get a change—and I must wait till dusk before I can venture to a shop where they sell second-hand things."

"I will give you a change presently," said Mrs. Brace. "And now tell me what you wish me to do. But let me warn you beforehand that if you think or hope that the Prince can aid in this matter, you are very much mistaken."

"I am not such a fool as to entertain such an idea, ma'am," answered the Gallows' Widow. "But *you* can do something—and I'll tell you what it is. Warren is sure to be committed to-day for trial at the Old Bailey. The Sessions are now on—and the magistrate won't throw any delays in the way of getting rid of a man who has so long been a terror to the public, and who has hitherto set the constables at defiance. This is the truth—and there's no use in closing one's eyes to it. So to Newgate will Warren be taken before night. But he must not stay there, ma'am, till his trial comes on: he must escape—or nothing can save him."

"And do you wish me to aid in that escape?" asked the milliner, trembling from head to foot.

"I do," was the firm and emphatic reply;—"and I will tell you how. But first let me observe that if you agree, I will find some means to convey to Warren an intimation, in the course of to-day, that he has friends actively working for him—and that there is hope."

"Proceed—and state your plans." said Mrs. Brace.

The young woman unfolded her scheme: but as the details thereof will transpire in due course, it is unnecessary to record them now. Suffice it to observe that after a long conversation the milliner consented to adopt the course proposed by the Gallows' Widow; and the latter, having changed her weeds for a dress which Mrs. Brace procured for her from Harriet, took her departure well pleased with the result of this interview.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A VISIT TO MRS. LINDLEY'S HOUSE.

While this scene was taking place at the dwelling of the handsome milliner in Pall Mall, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who had risen early that same morning, was repairing on foot towards Fore Street, Lambeth.

The young gentleman felt so much better and stronger that he was now capable of walking some considerable distance: the fresh frosty air did him good;—and there was a roseate hue upon his cheeks, until recently so wan—so thin—so pale!

On reaching Fore Street, he had no difficulty in discovering the midwife's house. Its sombre and sinister aspect—the large wooden shades which projected over the windows—and the heavy curtains drawn inside all the casements, were sufficient indications of that dread establishment, the exterior of which he had not failed to observe on the night when he visited it in company with the Countess of Desborough.

His summons at the front-door was speedily answered by Mrs. Lindley herself;—and the old harridan started back in dismay the moment she recognised Arthur Eaton. But instantly recovering herself—for she was a woman of strong nerve and great presence of mind—she threw all the courtesy of which she was capable into her invitation to enter the parlour; and a few moments saw the young gentleman and the midwife alone together in that gloomy apartment.

Mrs. Lindley placed a chair for the accommodation of her visitor; and seating herself near the fire, she caressed her great cat, which put up its arching back as it rubbed itself against her legs, purring all the time with a sound resembling the wooden works of a Dutch clock when being wound up.

"I wish to speak to Miss Aylmer," said Arthur Eaton, breaking a silence which seemed awful in that chamber of funereal gloom.

"Miss Aylmer left me yesterday, sir," answered the midwife.

"Left you yesterday!" exclaimed the young gentleman, in amazement. "At what o'clock did she thus take her departure?"

"At about five in the evening," was the response.

"But her uncle and the Countess are unaware of this circumstance," hastily observed Arthur: "for I was with them between eight and nine last night—and they knew not that Miss Aylmer even contemplated a removal for the next fortnight."

"It is nevertheless as I have told you, sir," replied Mrs. Lindley.

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Arthur. "Whither is she gone?"

"I am as ignorant as yourself on that head," was the rejoinder.

"Woman, you are deceiving me!" cried the young gentleman, in a stern tone.

"You may search throughout my dwelling, if you please," said Mrs. Lindley, with an air and manner of such confidence that Eaton saw she was speaking the truth.

"But this departure must have been sudden—precipitate?" he remarked, interrogatively.

"Somewhat so," returned the midwife. "The monotony of this place became intolerable to her—and, finding herself strong enough, she went away."

"And yet it is not three weeks since she was confined," exclaimed Arthur. "There is something mysterious and even wrong in this step which she has taken," he added, rather in a musing tone to himself than addressing the midwife. "That she should not have returned to the abode of her excellent uncle and his generous-hearted Countess, I cannot understand. They learnt from me last night my intention to visit Miss Aylmer this morning—they were made acquainted with the object for which I desired an interview with Fernanda——"

"And that object?" said Mrs. Lindley, in a voice of anxious inquiry.

"Does not regard you, madam," responded Mr. Eaton, somewhat sharply, as if he thought her query to be impertinent. "But I had a twofold motive in visiting this house to-day. My first and principal object was to see Miss Aylmer: my second was to hold a very serious conversation with *you*."

"With *me!*" ejaculated Mrs. Lindley, unable to subdue or conceal the strong spasm of terror which shook her entire frame; for her guilty soul was appalled with a thousand dreadful apprehensions sweeping through her imagination.

"Yes, madam—with *you*," repeated Arthur, emphatically, and at the same time fixing upon the woman a look in which abhorrence, pity, and reproach were visibly commingled.

"Hush! do not speak too loud—walls have ears—the people passing in the street may stop to listen," said the midwife, in broken sentences hoarsely whispered—while terror was evidently obtaining a firmer hold upon her.

"I am not accustomed to use intemperate language, nor to speak with excitement," observed Mr. Eaton. "You have nothing to fear from me, either; profound—alas! *too* profound—as my acquaintance with your crimes now is. I am not here as a minister of justice, but as one who would urge you to repentance. No—for the sake of that young but guilty creature whom I first tutored in the ways of error, I will spare you. You need not, therefore, dread even exposure at my hands: but I warn you, Mrs. Lindley, that this forbearance on my part depends solely upon the candour and truthfulness with which you shall respond to the questions that I am about to put to you."

"What do you mean, good sir?" inquired the woman, her countenance becoming ghastly, and her whole form shivering and shuddering from head to foot. "You spoke of *crimes*—or did my ears deceive me?"

"No—that was the word I used," answered Mr. Eaton, solemnly.

"Crimes!" murmured the midwife, staring upon him with a dull vacancy, as if her senses were appalled.

"Rouse yourself to hear and understand me, woman," proceeded Arthur, in the same serious, impressive, and unexcited tone. "When I was here upwards of a fortnight since, I discovered two documents in yonder book-case—and of those documents I took copies. The one was a receipt for a slow poison—the other was its antidote. The poison had for months been circulating in my veins—the antidote is rapidly restoring me to health and life!"

"My God! you will send me to the scaffold!" moaned the wretched woman, falling on her knees at the feet of the Hon. Arthur Eaton.

"No—I will pardon you, on the condition that I have named," said the young gentleman, forcing her to rise and compelling her to re-seat herself.

"O Lord! what will become of me?" she murmured, covering her haggard face with her long skinny hands, and rocking herself backward and forward in a state of mind more easily conceived than explained.

"I tell you again that you have nothing to fear, beyond the stings of your own guilty conscience, if you answer my questions faithfully and truly," said Eaton.

"Oh! sir, how generous you are!" cried the wretched woman, endeavouring to compose her features and steady the thoughts that were whirling in her brain. "Demand of me what you will—I swear to reply frankly and honestly."

"In the first place, you will give me an explanation of the way in which my valet, William Dudley, was suborned to administer a slow poison to his master," said the Hon. Mr. Eaton.

"William Dudley is a distant relation of mine," returned Mrs. Lindley, terror compelling her to speak the truth. "When Miss Aylmer first discovered that you did not intend to fulfil your promise and make her your wife, she resolved upon vengeance! This was while she was at her uncle's seat in Derbyshire, and while you were staying at Marchmont Castle, in the same county. Her first impulse was to poison you—and by means of heavy bribes she won over William Dudley to her interests. But Dudley recommended her to consult me; and when she was compelled to confess her situation to the Earl and Countess of Desborough, that nobleman inserted an advertisement in a newspaper to the effect that a place of the strictest retirement was sought for a young lady. In consequence of a letter which I received from William Dudley, I answered that advertisement; and thus was it contrived that Miss Aylmer should become an inmate of my establishment. In the eyes of the Earl and Countess this arrangement had no appearance of having been previously concerted; and in due time Miss Aylmer took up her abode beneath this roof."

"Continue your narrative," said Mr. Eaton. "It has all the aspect of truth—and it is well for you that your explanations are thus candidly and frankly given."

"When once Miss Aylmer was here," proceeded the midwife, encouraged by the young gentleman's observations, "you may readily conjecture how easy it was to concoct a scheme of vengeance on her behalf. Allured by the large sums which she lavished upon me—for she appears to have an illimitable command of gold—I consented in an evil hour to aid her in the accomplishment of her vindictive designs. Then did I reveal to her the mystery of that subtle poison for which I possess a receipt; and, in compliance with a letter despatched to Marchmont Castle, William Dudley solicited leave of absence to visit London for a few days."

"I remember it well," observed Mr. Eaton. "Proceed."

"He came hither—received his instructions, together with the poison—and hastened back into Derbyshire," continued the old woman. "Immediately afterwards your mysterious malady commenced."

"Yes—this is true!" murmured Arthur, shuddering from head to foot at the cold-blooded cruelty thus revealed.

"You are therefore satisfied that I am not deceiving you now?" said Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of anxiety.

"Too well satisfied—too well convinced that you are speaking the truth!" was the solemn answer.

"And you will spare me—you will not make use of this confession against me——"

"No—no: I have already pledged myself on that head. And now, woman," continued the Hon. Mr. Eaton, "you will tell me whether this infernal poison is at work elsewhere? Have you other victims——"

"I solemnly and sacredly assure you that there

breathes not a human being who, at least to my knowledge, is now suffering from the effects of that poison," responded Mrs. Lindley, emphatically.

"'Tis so far well. And now give me those two receipts," said Arthur.

The midwife rose from her chair:—opened the book-case—drew forth the large volume—and took thence the two papers which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had demanded.

"I am afraid that your memory retains but too well the particulars herein recited," he said: "at all events it will be prudent to serve them thus."

And he threw the receipts into the fire, where they were consumed in a moment.

"Would to God I had never seen them—never had them in my possession at all!" exclaimed the midwife. "Oh! sir, how can I sufficiently thank you for your forbearance with regard to me?"

"Be assured that henceforth I shall keep a constant watch upon you, Mrs. Lindley," answered the young man: "and that if you sin again, nothing shall prevent me from handing you over to the grasp of justice. But you have yet another answer to give me: for I must know whence and how you obtained these receipts?"

"From an old man named Lightfoot," responded Mrs. Lindley. "I heard a few days ago that he was dead."

"Now, then, our interview terminates," said Mr. Eaton, rising from his chair. "But before I take my departure, let me again warn you to be circumspect in your future conduct. You have been dealt with by me in a merciful manner: and if anything can lead you to repentance, it must be the startling conviction that your neck is thus humanely withdrawn by my hand from the halter into which you had thrust it. I would, however, much rather you should live to experience a sincere contrition, than that you should be hurried from the world with all your iniquities upon your head. You have behaved like a ferocious and cold-blooded savage towards me—you were hurrying me to the tomb by means of your black arts—and you were ministering to the fiendish vengeance of a guilty young creature whom you should have counselled and guided into a better path. Nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand, placed in my position, would have remorselessly handed you over to the officials of justice—aye, and would have even rejoiced to behold your quivering form suspended to the fatal beam. But I have spared you: and your secret is safe with me. Not a word calculated to injure you shall pass my lips: I will not deprive you of the means of earning your bread—for *that* would be only to force you back into the ways of crime, despite perhaps of the inclination which you may now cherish to repent sincerely and truly for the past. Prove, then, that you are deserving of this mercy at my hands—and adopt such a course of life, during the few years which remain to you, as will atone for those misdeeds that unfortunately cannot be recalled. Farewell, Mrs. Lindley—and may this lesson be as salutary as it is terrible."

"Heaven knows I never can forget your goodness, nor cease to reflect upon the words which have just fallen from your lips," murmured the midwife, in a suffocating tone.

"God grant that the impression may be permanent," said Eaton;—and he hurriedly quitted the house, the atmosphere of which seemed painful for him to breathe.

When he was gone, Mrs. Lindley threw herself back in her arm-chair and gave way to a long train of thoughts. Terror had so subdued and unnerved her that, while the young man was in her presence, and even for a considerable time after he had taken his departure, she was profoundly touched by the sense of her own abominable wickedness and by his unparalleled generosity. But as the effects of that tremendous fear gradually subsided, her heart elapsed into its wonted callosity—even as the lava, which the volcano's raging fire melts into liquid softness, hardens and cools down into impenetrable rock.

At the expiration of an hour from the time that Eaton left her, she fortified herself with a strong cordial; and then repairing to her own private chamber, she opened her strong box, and counted the piles of gold which she had amassed. Oh! how speedily—how completely are the better feelings of human nature crushed and hidden beneath the weight of riches: how easily does the smitten conscience experience an anodyne in the ill-gotten wages of iniquity! Thus was it with this diabolical hag:—and ere mid-day she chuckled over her gold—chuckled over her impunity—chuckled over the narrow escape which she had that forenoon seen!

Hours passed away—the shades of evening crept slowly upon the hemisphere—and soon after dusk a sharp and impatient knock was heard at the front-door.

Mrs. Lindley hastened to answer the summons; and a lady, enveloped in a mantle and closely veiled, entered the passage.

The midwife said nothing: for she knew who the visitor was;—and she led her immediately into the parlour, the door of which she closed carefully.

The lady raised her veil and revealed the countenance of Fernanda Aylmer,—that countenance which was still pale and colourless, but which now wore an expression of firmness and decision.

"You did not expect me so soon again, my dear Mrs. Lindley?" said the young lady, as she seated herself near the blazing fire—for the weather was penetratingly cold without.

"I did not: but I knew who you were the instant that I opened the door," responded the midwife. "What has brought you hither this evening?"

"You shall soon know," answered the lady of angelic beauty and of demoniac heart. "In a word, then, I have seen Arthur Eaton—and I am convinced that Dudley is playing us false."

"And yet it was he himself who announced to us, yesterday morning, that Mr. Eaton was gradually—nay, almost rapidly—recovering his health," observed Mrs. Lindley. "How can you reconcile this fact with the idea that he is deceiving us?"

"Listen to me patiently for a few moments," returned Miss Aylmer. "When you received that letter yesterday morning, in which Dudley informed you that his young master was, by some unaccountable means, triumphing over the poison nightly administered to him in the water placed by his bed-side, I asked you particularly if you thought the poison could in course of time lose its effects. You answered me as emphatically in the negative. With this assurance in my mind, I could still perceive three distinct ways of accounting for the

alteration in Arthur's outward appearance. The first was that the near approach of death was heralded by a hectic glow on the cheeks which Dudley had mistaken for the returning hue of health:—the second was that Arthur had discovered the cause of his malady and was taking the antidote;—and the third was that Dudley no longer administered to him the poison."

"All those considerations I likewise weighed in my own mind," observed Mrs. Lindley: "and while I rejected the last, I wavered between the two first."

"And I fluctuated amidst all three," returned Fernanda. "Well—in that state of uncertainty and suspense—resolved not to abandon my vengeance, and yet fearful that it would escape me—I determined to leave your house, take a lodging as close to Lord Marchmont's mansion as possible, and satisfy myself with my own eyes as to the alteration which had occurred in Arthur's appearance. Moreover, I was anxious to see Dudley—tax him with deceiving me—and judge by his replies how far my suspicions on that head were well founded. Accordingly I obtained apartments in the very next house to that where Arthur dwells with his father. I slept in my new lodging last night. This morning I enveloped myself in my cloak—concealed my face with this thick black veil—and walked about Hanover Square until near mid-day. Presently I saw my seducer approaching. He was proceeding at a slow pace, and was apparently buried in deep thought. I obtained a full view of his countenance: but he noticed me not:—and even if he had observed, he could not have recognised me. Oh! he is indeed altered in appearance, Mrs. Lindley," continued the vindictive young lady, the words hissing between her teeth from the rage that filled her bosom: "for it was no hectic that which dyed his cheeks—no unnatural brilliancy which shone in his eyes! His step, too, was comparatively firm and elastic;—and every symptom—every sign denoted returning health. I went back to my lodgings, and reflected on all this. My first hypothesis was destroyed: it was a resuscitating vigour, and not an approaching dissolution, which had produced that change in his appearance! Then I thought of my second theory. Could he have discovered the secret of his malady?—could he have obtained the antidote? No—for if this were the case, his suspicions would have fallen upon *me*, and ere now I should have been the inmate of a criminal gaol. What, then, can I believe? That Dudley has repented and has ceased to administer the poison!"

"I have heard you with patience, my dear young lady, because you requested that I would do so," said Mrs. Lindley. "But it is now my turn to speak. Arthur Eaton was here this morning?"

"Ah! and for what purpose?" demanded Fernanda.

"He has discovered everything—and pardoned everything!" replied Mrs. Lindley, in a low but impressive tone. "Poison and antidote are alike known to him—and Dudley has *not* deceived you."

"You amaze me!" ejaculated Miss Aylmer, now painfully excited.

"Hush! not so loud—the walls have ears!" whispered the old harridan, impatiently. "Yes—he has discovered all—he came hither to see you upon some matter of importance, but the nature of which he would not reveal to me—and he was surprised when he found that you were gone. Last night he was with your uncle and the Countess ——"

"I care not for them—my vengeance is the sentiment that absorbs all other considerations!" interrupted Miss Aylmer, impatiently. "How came he to discover the secret of his malady!—how came he to possess the antidote?"

"The night that he was here with the Countess of Desborough, he found the receipts in that bookcase," answered Mrs. Lindley; "and a chemist has doubtless been consulted. He said that for *your* sake he would spare *me*—and his language was kind and considerate respecting yourself."

"Oh! I scorn his kindness—I contemn his forbearance!" exclaimed Fernanda, every lineament of her beauteous countenance convulsed with rage. "Think you that my revenge shall pause in its progress here?—do you imagine for a single moment that I am to be melted by his pardon—soothed by his forgiveness? No—no: it is not thus that Fernanda Aylmer buries her wrongs in oblivion!"

And she rose to depart.

"What are you about to do, my dear young lady?" demand Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "Consider—pause—reflect, I beseech you! Any attempt that you make upon Mr. Eaton's life, may redound with fearful consequences on ourselves. Oh! do nothing rashly or hastily, I entreat you! His forbearance may yield to exasperation—his merciful spirit may be moved to retaliation! Nay—to ensure his personal safety, he may be induced to invoke the assistance of the law—and then you involve *me* in *your* destruction!"

"Fear nothing, good woman," said Fernanda, in a cold and resolute tone: "whatever I may now do, shall be done well and effectually. I see that William Dudley is faithful: aided by him, my vengeance will be consummated in a moment. There! give me a phial of some deadly poison for that gold!" she exclaimed, throwing a heavy purse upon the table.

"Hush! the very walls have ears," murmured the midwife, in a hoarse and hollow whisper. "My God! you would destroy me, body and soul, Miss Aylmer: have mercy upon me!"

"Well—for a tenth portion of this amount of gold a chemist will supply me with what I require," said Fernanda coolly, as she took the purse up again.

"Stay—I will do it!" moaned rather than spoke the midwife, her avarice getting the better of her fears.

"Be quick, then—for I am anxious to depart," said the young lady.

Mrs. Lindley quitted the room—hastened up to her own private chamber—and speedily returned with a small phial in her hand. This she gave to Fernanda, from whom she received the gold in exchange.

"The potion may be relied upon?" inquired Miss Aylmer, with a significant look.

"Death will be almost instantaneous if only three drops be poured between the lips of a sleeping person," answered the midwife, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"You are not deceiving me, Mrs. Lindley?" exclaimed Fernanda, eyeing the woman suspiciously.

"On my soul, I entertained not such an idea for a moment!" returned the midwife.

"We will see," said Miss Aylmer coolly: and, as she spoke she caught up the great black cat in her arms.

"Young lady, I forbid you to injure that animal!" cried Mrs. Lindley, in a far louder and more excited tone than she was accustomed to speak. "Put it down again, I say!"

And she endeavoured to wrest the cat from Fernanda's grasp.

"Be quiet—I command you!" exclaimed Miss Aylmer. "We shall disturb the house ——"

"True—my God!" murmured the midwife, falling back into her chair.

At the same moment the cruel and merciless young lady forced the orifice of the bottle into the cat's mouth; and poured a considerable quantity of the fluid down its throat. Then, rising suddenly from her seat, she let the animal drop upon the rug, where it lay motionless; and the atmosphere of the room was impregnated with a strong odour of almonds.

"Now are you satisfied?" demanded Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of gloomy rage. "The poor animal was killed in a moment—as if struck by lightning."

"I am sorry that I should have deprived you of a favourite, my good friend," responded Fernanda, almost gaily—so pleased was she at the result of her experiment: "but I can assure you that I am much happier now that I have acquired the certainty of consummating my vengeance at any moment. Farewell, Mrs. Lindley: you need fear nothing!"

"Will you not see your friend Caroline Walters, before you leave?" inquired the midwife.

"Not this evening—not this evening," answered Miss Aylmer, impatiently: "I am in too great a hurry to see your relative, William Dudley."

The young lady then took her departure.

As soon as she was gone the midwife lifted the dead cat from the rug: and as she did this, a heavy sigh escaped from her breast. For this infernal old hag, who held human life as naught, and who without compunction could cast a new-born child to the deep waters of the Thames,—this fiendish wretch found her heart moved to compassion by the fate of a favourite cat! Nay, more—she descended into her back kitchen; and, raising a stone with some sharp instrument, she dug a hole with a fire-shovel, and interred the cat then and there. And as she threw back the earth, a tear fell from her eye: for she remembered how the huge beast had loved her, and how it was wont to purr when she caressed it. But never, when making away with an infant babe, had the vile old harridan paused to reflect how sweetly it would smile and how prettily its little chin would wreathe into dimples, if it were only permitted to live!

Yes—it was with all the solemnity of a funeral, apart from the prayers and the coffin, that the detestable midwife thus buried her great black cat;—and let not the reader wonder at this incident nor deem it exaggerated—for not many years have elapsed since that mighty hero, the valorous Field-Marshal Prince Albert, interred his dog Eos with almost Christian obsequies in the grounds attached to Windsor Castle!

Having disposed of the corpse of her cat, Mrs. Lindley returned to the parlour and sate down to reflect upon the dangers which she was likely to incur from the new step that Fernanda Aylmer was taking. At length her fears increased to such an extent, that she was resolved to adopt some energetic proceeding in order to warn Arthur Eaton of his danger.

Her measures were soon decided upon. She would repair at once to Lord Marchmont's mansion and obtain an interview with that nobleman's son. But then, might she not encounter her relation, William Dudley?—and, allured by the gold of Fernanda Aylmer, would not this individual betray to the young lady the circumstance of the old midwife's visit?

Yes:—this was a difficulty, however, that was not insurmountable; and, opening her desk, Mrs. Lindley penned the following letter:—

"I am waiting in a hackney-coach close by. If you value your safety come out and speak to me. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate. But you must not allow William Dudley to learn that I am so near.

"THE MIDWIFE OF FORE STREET."

Having sealed this letter, she addressed it in a feigned hand to the Hon. Arthur Eaton, writing the word "*Private*" on the envelope. Then, muffling herself up in a cloak, the hood of which she drew over her head, Mrs. Lindley sallied forth—took a hackney-coach at the nearest stand—and ordered the driver to proceed to Hanover Square.

In due time the vehicle stopped according to her instructions, within a short distance of Lord Marchmont's mansion; and the coachman delivered the note at the front door. Several minutes elapsed, during which Mrs. Lindley remained in torturing suspense. Mr. Eaton might not be at home—perhaps he would not return until very late—and, in this case, what was she to do? The murder might be accomplished before morning; and justice might eventually trace out her complicity in the deed?

But these reflections were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward so that her lips almost touched his ear at the window of the vehicle, said in a low, hoarse whisper, "Fernanda has been with me this evening—and she is resolved upon your death. A poison which kills its victim as if he were struck by a thunderbolt, is in her possession; and she will not scruple to use it."

"I thank you sincerely—most sincerely for this information," answered Mr. Eaton, in the same subdued tone. "Now you have given me a proof of better feelings on your part—and you shall not repent your altered conduct. Farewell."

With these words he hurried back into the mansion; and the vehicle immediately drove away.

CHAPTER L.

THE POISONERS.

IT was midnight,—deep midnight, as proclaimed by all the clocks in the vast metropolis; and a profound silence reigned throughout the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square.

But, hark!—a door, slightly creaking on its hinges, opens on one of the upper storeys; and a man, who has not laid aside his clothes, nor thought of retiring to his couch, comes forth. He bears in one hand a candle, which he shades with the other; and the light shines upon the countenance of William Dudley.

There is an unnatural pallor upon those cheeks usually florid and healthy: a sinister gleaming appears in the eyes that are wont to have so meek and

placid an expression;—and the whole aspect of the man denotes a troubled mind.

He starts at his own shadow, which seems a tall black spectre creeping after him along the passage-wall: now he pauses and hesitates—his avarice weighs in the balance against his fears—and a straw shall turn the scale.

Oh! on such occasions how seldom is it that the better feelings of the human breast obtain the victory. The valet has calculated Fernanda's gold in contrast with the value of his master's life and the risk he runs in aiding her to take it;—and he pursues his way!

He descends the stairs—stopping frequently to listen as the steps creak beneath him;—and now he is again startled by his own shadow as it appears to chase him round an angle which he is turning.

But at last he gains the hall: and, placing the light in a niche, he cautiously and noiselessly opens the front-door.

A lady, with a thick black veil over her countenance, instantly enters the mansion; and William Dudley closes the door.

"Did any one observe you, Miss?" demanded the valet, in a whisper which, though scarcely audible, expressed the most intense anxiety and alarm.

"The square was utterly deserted," answered Fernanda. "You have nothing to fear—and yet you seem to tremble like a leaf."

"Why, Miss—to tell you the truth, when I was a little boy my father, who was a good man, used to tell me that the eye of God saw everything;—and it really does appear to me as if God's looks were fixed upon me now."

These words were delivered in a very low but impressive voice; and for an instant Fernanda Aylmer was staggered by their force. But speedily recovering herself, she placed a heavy bag in the valet's hands, saying, "Twice the promised amount shall be yours to-morrow, if you only enable me to succeed to-night!"

And William Dudley, securing the gold about his person, took the candle from the niche and led the way up-stairs without uttering another word.

That man had bartered his soul for gold: it was like selling his God—since he knew that the Almighty's eye was upon him. Had he been an atheist, his crime were less—because he would not then have believed that he was sinning against his Maker and violating heaven's own blessed laws. But he was a Christian in faith—he had faith, too, in that heaven and in a juxta-existing hell—and yet he dared to lend himself to a deed of murder!

When the well-educated sin, their iniquity is ten thousand times greater than that of the poor ignorant peasant or unlettered operative;—and therefore are the backslidings of Royalty and Aristocracy offences more positively heinous and damnable than even the blackest deeds which the uneducated poor ever perpetrate. Adultery (a vice so common in the upper classes) on the part of a titled lady deserves a larger measure of God's wrath than even infanticide on the part of an ignorant young woman belonging to the lowest grade;—and drunkenness in a peer is worse than theft in a peasant.

But while we are pausing to make these reflections—(and the disgusting demoralization of the British Aristocracy never can be exposed too often)—William Dudley and Fernanda Aylmer have gained the landing which communicates with Arthur Eaton's chamber.

Slowly—gradually—noiselessly did the perfidious valet turn the handle of the door;—and in a few moments Fernanda Aylmer crossed the threshold of the apartment, followed by her accomplice.

Eaton was in bed; and his eyes were closed—apparently in profound slumber. The candles were burning upon the night-table: an open book showed that the young man had been reading. All was silent—solemnly silent, save the regular respiration of the occupant of the couch;—for both Fernanda and William Dudley held their breath through the fear of awakening their intended victim.

Taking the phial from the bosom of her dress, Miss Aylmer raised her veil and advanced towards the bed with a step so light that it seemed as it she were treading upon the air, and not upon the floor.

But the instant that she reached the foot of the couch, Eaton sprang up to a sitting posture, exclaiming, "Fernanda—Dudley—attempt not to escape, or I will alarm the house and hand you both over to the officers of justice!"

The valet rushed forward and threw himself upon his knees by the bed-side—his countenance ghastly with terror and remorse; while Fernanda, amazed and stupified, was rivetted to the spot—her eyes staring wildly upon the countenance of Arthur Eaton, as if she could scarcely believe that he was indeed awake, and that her diabolical scheme had failed signally.

"Rise, sir, and hear me attentively," said the young gentleman, in a stern and commanding tone to his valet;—"and you, Fernanda, compose yourself as well as you can—for our conference, unseasonable though the hour is, may perhaps be a long one."

"And if I refuse to remain here another moment?" cried Miss Aylmer, endeavouring to veil her bitter disappointment and rage beneath an assumed tone of haughty confidence.

"I shall ring this bell violently," answered Eaton;—"you will be stopped upon the stairs—and I would then abandon you to your fate."

"And if I remain, what am I to expect at your hands?" demanded the young lady.

"Mercy—pardon—forgiveness," he responded, in an altered and softened voice.

"I shall remain to hear all you may have to say," returned Fernanda: "but I scorn your mercy—despise your pardon—contemn your forgiveness."

"Be seated—and listen to me with patience," said Eaton: then, addressing himself to the valet, who had risen from his knees and was standing near the foot of the bed, he added, "And you also, William give me your attention."

Miss Aylmer took a chair—for she felt worn out with the excitement and fatigues which she had undergone during the last few hours.

"You are both no doubt prepared to learn that your guilt is known to me in all its details," resumed Arthur Eaton. "Accident threw in my way two receipts,—the one a poison—the other its antidote. A chemist explained to me their nature and effects: and the same moment that revealed to me the cause of my mysterious malady, placed in my hands the means of cure. Sixteen days have elapsed since then; and already have I been enabled, under

heaven's mercy, to wrestle successfully with death. But every night, William Dudley, has your hand impregnated with poison the beverage placed by my side; and every morning have you found the decanter empty. Think not, however, that I imbibed the contents: no—it is the antidote which I have taken instead! And now you marvel wherefore I have remained thus silent—thus patient—thus tranquil during these sixteen days: you wonder why I have foreborne from invoking the aid of the law to punish those who sought to send me to an early grave? I will explain to you my motives for this forbearance. Associated as you are, William Dudley, with this young lady in the black designs which heaven's intervention has made abortive, you are of course no stranger to the cause—the unhappy cause—of her burning animosity against me. Alas! I know that I have wronged her—deeply wronged her; and I will not advance a single reason to palliate my perfidy and my crime. I will admit that I have been both perfidious and criminal;—and it is therefore for *her* sake that I have hitherto cherished in my own bosom the tremendous secrets which constitute the history of my lingering malady and providential cure. Had I given *you*, William Dudley, up to justice—had I taken a constable to the house of your relative in Fore Street, for the purpose of consigning *her* to a criminal gaol—I could not in justice have spared Miss Aylmer. And even if I had spared her, there were a thousand chances that the arrest of her accomplices would have led to the elucidation of her guilt. For *her* sake, therefore, I have held my peace—for *her* sake I shall still remain silent. Not even my beloved father suspects aught of all this;—no—nor even your uncle and the Countess," he added, turning towards Fernanda.

The young lady showed by a slight inclination of the head that she heard and understood him: but not a syllable fell from her lips.

"And now, William Dudley," continued Arthur, after a short pause, "you may wonder that I should have still retained you in my service during the last sixteen days. I had two objects in contemplation by thus acting. The first was to ascertain whether the spectacle of your young master recovering health and strength, after reaching the very verge of the grave, and retracing the path to life and vigour in spite of the venom which you had infused into his veins,—I was anxious, I say, to satisfy myself whether such a spectacle would move your heart—touch you with remorse—and awaken better feelings within your soul. Had this trial resulted in your favour, I should yet have entertained the hope that you were not past redemption: I should have considered that it was well worth while to attempt the salvation of a fellow-creature in such a case. Then, in due time, I should have taken you by the hand—and I should have said, '*Dudley, I know all! But you have repented—and I forgive the past as sincerely as if it had never been!*'—Alas! it is not in my power thus to address you. Night after night has the poison been mixed with the beverage placed by my side; and morning after morning has the chemist said to me, '*The water is envenomed still!*' And now, as if to crown your tremendous guilt, you seek my chamber in the middle of the night—with what intent I need not tell you, miserable man that you are!"

"Mercy—mercy, Mr. Eaton! My God! spare me!" moaned the wretched Dudley, again sinking on his knees and joining his hands in entreaty—while the horrible workings of his countenance bore dread testimony to the nature of the emotions that were excited in his breast.

"I have already informed you that it is my intention to spare you, so far as the law is concerned," said Arthur, scarcely able to conquer a sensation of loathing and abhorrence in respect to the man in whom he had been so cruelly deceived. "Rise, sir—rise, I command you—and hear me out."

The valet resumed his standing posture at the foot of the bed: but his eyes were cast down—for he was unable to look in the face of that young man who had been so kind a master, and towards whom he had acted as a veritable fiend.

And all this while Fernanda remained seated, motionless as a statue—and as a statue pale and glacial in outward appearance: but heaven alone can tell how dire—how terrible were the feelings that agitated in her upheaved bosom.

"I have now explained my first motive for retaining you in my service since the day on which I discovered your guilt," resumed Mr. Eaton, continuing to address himself to the valet, on whose ears his words fell with a power and effect that shook him to the lowest confines of his being: and yet Arthur's language flowed in a calm—measured—unexcited strain; as if it were an unbiased and merciful judge who was speaking. "My second motive," he continued, "was intimately associated with my intentions respecting Miss Aylmer; and as it appears that you have no secrets with each other, I will speak frankly and openly. Know then, Fernanda, that I went this morning to Mrs. Lindley's house in order to obtain an interview with you; and my object was to offer you my hand."

The young lady started at this strange announcement: but, instantly recovering herself, she said in a tone of icy coldness, "It is well that you take to yourself credit for a deed of generosity, now that you may safely vaunt it without being expected to repeat the proposal."

"I take Almighty God to witness that such is the truth—the solemn truth!" exclaimed Arthur Eaton, emphatically. "Would you have other evidence thereof in addition to my word, seek your uncle the Earl of Desborough—seek the Countess—and ask them to tell you all I said to them last evening."

"You doubtless told them that I was a poisoner—but that you would forgive me!" returned the young lady, with a bitterness and a malignity which showed how relentless and diabolical was her hatred towards him whom she had once loved with such an impassioned fervour.

"No, Fernanda," rejoined Arthur: "had I thought of betraying you to your nearest relatives, I should not have hesitated to give you up to justice. But I reasoned within the secret depths of my own soul—and I reflected that I had wronged you—that I had driven you to the desperation which prompted you to wreak so terrible a retribution—and that it was for me to make amends. Therefore did I hasten this morning to Fore Street; and had I found you in that place still, I should have said, '*Fernanda, God is giving me back my health; and in a few weeks I shall be perfectly resuscitated. Again do I offer you my hand; and now you cannot accuse me of an anxiety to make an atonement only when under the influence of that remorse which heralds an approaching dissolution. Be generous, Fernanda, even as I seek to be just: let us forget the past, and live in hope of a happier future.*' —Thus should I have spoken; and if you had still refused to accept the only amends which lay in my power to propose, at all events a weight would have been removed from my conscience. I should not have revealed to you the fact that I had discovered the secret of my malady and that you were the cause: no—that secret would have accompanied me to the tomb; and if you had proved a good wife to me, never should a word or look on my part have led you to suspect that your past iniquity was so fully known in all its details to me. I should have been happy in your repentance—your contrition;—and I should have considered that I had saved a soul from that eternal ruin towards which my own conduct had driven it in the beginning to take the first step. Now, therefore, you can understand, William Dudley," added Arthur Eaton, once more turning to the valet, "my second motive for hitherto retaining you in my service. For as it was my intention to keep from Miss Aylmer the circumstance that I had discovered the cause of my malady, I should likewise have observed the same profound secrecy in that respect towards yourself."

"Oh! my good kind master, what a wretch I have been!" exclaimed the valet, wringing his hands, while tears trickled down his cheeks.

"Peace, drivelling fool!" ejaculated Fernanda, turning sharply round upon him.

"Nay—speak not thus," said Arthur Eaton, in a severe tone of rebuke, as he fixed his eyes almost sternly upon Miss Aylmer. "Would to God that words of contrition might come from *your* lips!"

"Never!" cried the young lady, starting from her chair. "I see that you have turned a saint, Arthur Eaton—perhaps a hypocrite—and I now

despise you, in addition to all the unconquerable hatred which my heart cherishes, and will ever cherish towards you."

With these words she turned abruptly away and advanced to the door.

The young man spoke not a syllable to detain her;—and she took her departure.

A long silence then ensued in the chamber,—Arthur Eaton lying back upon the pillows of his couch and giving way to his reflections, which on *her* account were painful in the extreme—and the valet still standing, a piteous object of mingled shame and remorse, near the bed.

"Dudley," at length said his generous master, "am I to believe that you are sincerely and truly penitent for the black iniquity in which you have been made an accomplice?"

"On my soul, dear sir, I could wish that it were all undone—that I could again be the innocent man I was ere temptation came in my way!" was the prompt and impressive answer. "Here is the gold which I received as an earnest of this night's contemplated crime," he continued, throwing the heavy bag upon the table near him; "and here," he added, drawing forth some papers from his pocket-book, "are the Bank receipts for other monies which I have at different times received from Miss Aylmer."

"Now am I assured that your repentance is sincere, William," said Mr. Eaton. "For the present I will take charge of those wages of iniquity: to-morrow I will tell you how they shall be employed. Retire to your own chamber—and fear not that I shall treat you with severity. No—it is my purpose to afford you every opportunity of making your peace with heaven and becoming an useful member of society."

The man threw himself upon his knees—took his master's hand—conveyed it to his lips—wept plenteously over it—and endeavoured to express his gratitude and his penitence—but could not; for his voice was lost in profound sobs. He was deeply—deeply affected: and Eaton spoke kindly and feelingly to him.

At length William Dudley withdrew to his own chamber: but ere he sought his couch, he prayed long and fervently.

CHAPTER LI.

MRS. PIGGLEBERRY AND HER LODGERS.

It was nine o'clock in the evening of the day following the incidents just related: and Tim Meagles was seated in the parlour at his lodgings, discussing rum-punch, and conversing with the Amazon who occupied a chair near him. Indeed, Mr. Meagles was placed on one side of the hearth, and his fair friend on the other; and while he drank the steaming liquor from a tumbler, she sipped her allowance from a wine-glass. We must also observe that the gentleman was smoking a full-flavoured havannah; and the lady was indulging in a Spanish cigarette, the tobacco of which it was formed being of so mild a flavour that there was no danger of its marring the fragrance of her breath or dimming the dazzling brilliancy of her fine teeth.

The fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—the lamp diffused a rich mellow light through the apartment—the thick curtains were closed—the atmosphere was warm—and everything was comfortable, although the air was piercing cold without and the snow was falling in thick flakes.

"Well, Joe Warren and his friends seem to have got themselves into a precious scrape at last, Letitia," observed Meagles, throwing himself back in his chair and watching the blue wreaths of thin smoke that curled upward from his cigar. "Committed for trial yesterday—sent to Newgate——"

"And Warren is placed in a cell by himself as a very desperate character," interrupted the Amazon.

"Yes—and this morning's paper also says that he is heavily ironed," added Meagles. "Well, I am really sorry for him: he is a brave fellow, and faithful to those who employ him. At least, so I have heard. But as for the Big Beggarman—the scoundrel who played you and me that scurvy trick at his vile den in Horslydown—I am glad he is in for it."

"So am I," rejoined Lady Lade. "But only fancy that man Page having been so active in the process of giving the party up to justice: for I suppose it is the same who sold us the missing half of the certificate the other day?"

"The very same," answered Meagles. "When he called and proposed to sell it, he told me that he wished to conclude the bargain at once, as he wanted to be off to Aylesbury on very particular business; and he mentioned the name of Sir Richard Stamford at the time."

"Then Mr. Page is assuredly a very shrewd fellow," observed the Amazon. "He received a thousand guineas from us, for the half of the document; and now he is feathering his nest by means of the services he is rendering the baronet."

"No doubt of it. But what an extraordinary history is Sir Richard Stamford's," continued Meagles. "A few weeks ago the whole country was ringing with the awful crimes he had committed—murder, fraud, forgery, arson, and heaven knows what: and now, all of a sudden, he makes his innocence as apparent as the sun at noon-day. Indeed the evidence which was given yesterday at Bow Street was overwhelming against Martin and Ramsey as the real forgers, and also as having put a quantity of spurious coin into circulation. Then the kidnapping of Sir Richard and Mr. Page was equally well proven against Warren and the Big Beggarman; and a fellow called Briggs was shown to have played the part of gaoler at the house in Thacker's Court."

"If that were all that was brought forward against Warren—I mean the kidnapping business—he would get off with transportation or imprisonment," said the Amazon: "but up jumps the indefatigable and universal Mr. Page to prove a highway robbery against him."

"A *highway* robbery, committed in a *lane* leading out of the Edgeware Road," observed Meagles, laughingly.

"Well—the law makes a *lane* a *highway* for its own special purposes, you great booby," returned the Amazon.

"So I am afraid poor Warren will find to his cost," answered Meagles. "The whole gang of them will be tried this week, or the beginning of next. I shall certainly go to the Old Baily and hear the proceedings."

At this moment, a low and timid knock was heard

at the door; and Meagles, as if to inspire the individual with courage, shouted out "Come in!" at the very top of his voice.

The door opened slowly—and an elderly woman, dressed in black, and having a respectable appearance, entered the room.

"Well, Mrs. Piggleberry, what news?" inquired Meagles, as he caught a glimpse of his landlady's countenance, which was broad, ruddy, and good-tempered in expression.

"Nothink partickler, sir," she answered, in a mincing tone and with a low curtsey: "leastways it's of no wery great importance; only Mr. Brogden, which lives on the second floor front, would be much obleeged if you'd be so kind as to have the goodness to take the trouble to tell Master Wasp to give him his vig—because he's afeard of catching cold if he stays much longer without it."

"His wig!—Mr. Brogden's wig!" exclaimed Meagles, laughing heartily—his mirth being echoed by that of Lady Letitia Lade.

"Well, it *is* funny, sir," said Mrs. Piggleberry, thinking it right to laugh also. "But Master Wasp is a dear delightful boy, and full of sperrets, to be sure. Only if he would be so condescending as to give Mr. Brogden back his vig, I should feel so much obleeged."

"But how came Wasp with the wig at all?" demanded Meagles.

"Why, my dear good sir," responded Mrs. Piggleberry, approaching the table in a deferential manner, "as Mr. Brogden was a-going up stairs to his room this evening about six o'clock, that sweet playful creetur' Master Wasp let down a long bit of string over the bannisters on the second floor; and as the string happened to have a fish-hook at the end, it wery natarally come in contack with Mr Brogden's vig. Well, I s'pose, Master Wasp give a pull,—and away went the vig, and Mr. Brogden went up after it—but, behold ye! Master Wasp was indiskiverable. So Mr. Brogden rushes into his room and rings the bell with a wiolence that makes me think the house was a-fire; and I runs up to see where it was a-blazin'. But there wasn't no fire—only Mr. Brogden's vig a-missin'—and he, poor gentleman! obleeged to put on his cotton night-cap. So I begged him not to kick up a rumpus, as I know'd Mr. Lade, sir, was with you, and I wouldn't have you disturbed on no account whatsomever. But as Master Wasp only laughs in his sweet playful way when I ask him about the vig, and as Mr. Brogden says he'll come down and speak to you, sir, I thought it best just to step in and tell—leastways, to hint that, perhaps Master Wasp won't mind givin' up the vig if so be you would have the goodness to be so kind as to take the trouble to ask him."

"Order Wasp to come up to me directly, Mrs. Piggleberry," exclaimed Meagles, who, as well as the Amazon, had been convulsed with laughter, during the whole time the landlady was explaining her second-floor lodger's misadventure.

"Now pray don't scold the dear boy, sir!" said the worthy woman in a beseeching tone. "He's such a nice youth—so amiable and all that——"

"Well, go down, then, Mrs. Piggleberry," interrupted Meagles, "and tell him that he must take up Mr. Brogden's wig at once, with a handsome apology. But wait a moment, my good creature," added Tim, a thought striking him: "who's that sanctified-looking gentleman that has taken your third floor?"

"Lord bless ye, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry, clasping her hands and turning up the whites of her eyes; "that's a wery pious man—and I do raly think his presence will bring a blessin' upon my house. He come down into the kitchen this mornin', sir, and said so many good things to me and Jemimy—that's the servint-gal, you know, sir—that we both whimpered for an hour; and he gave us some religious tracks, as he calls 'em, sir, and told us to perooze 'em with attention, and they'd be the salwation of us."

"And pray who is this pious gentleman, Mrs. Piggleberry?" asked Meagles, exchanging a sly smile with the Amazon, who was greatly amused by the landlady's description of her new lodger.

"Well, sir, I can't say I exactly understand what he is," was the response: "but he told me when he took the wacant floor that he was a *New Light*. Perhaps you know what that means, sir?" added Mrs. Piggleberry, in a submissive and deferential tone.

"May I be hanged if I do!" exclaimed Meagles. "But what is his name?"

"The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, sir," answered the widow.

"Ah! then he belongs to some religious sect called *New Lights*," said Lady Letitia Lade, with a merry laugh. "But what on earth could have induced him to take a lodging in one of the most fashionable quarters of the West End?"

"Well, sir," answered Mrs. Piggleberry, addressing herself to the Amazon, whom, be it remembered, she invariably called *Mr. Lade*—for the good widow was too discreet to suffer it to appear that she recognised the sex of her best lodger's constant companion,—"Well, sir, I raly can't satisfy you on that pint. But I know that the reverend gentleman has plenty of money: for he paid me a quarter in advance—and it seems he possesses a good friend in one Salem: because he says, says he, as he counted down the guineas, '*It's all through that blessed Salem I'm able to set up my staff in your taybernacle, my Christian sister.*'—So you see, sir, he calls my house a taybernacle, for which I'm wery much obleeged to him: for I know it's a holy word and carries a blessin' along with it. Ah! Mr. Sneaksby is a wery good man—a wery pious gentleman," continued the widow, shaking her head solemnly. "This afternoon a fine carriage stops at the door—and a great tall handsome livery-servant helps out two fat old ladies, so magnificently dressed;—and Mr. Sneaksby comes down into the hall to receive them—and he gives 'em each a buss on both cheeks, which he called '*the kiss of peace.*' Then he leads them up stairs; and the bell rings. I answer it myself; because just at that moment Jemimy was a-polishin' the fenders and cleaning the sarsepans, and was as black as a tinker and not fit to be seen. So Mr. Sneaksby orders me to get two bottles of wine and some nice sweet biscuits; and one of the ladies gives me a guinea to pay for 'em. Well, when I went up again with the wine and the cakes, the reverend gentleman and the two ladies was all three a-cryin' bitterly, and beatin' their buzzims, and calling themselves '*miserable sinners*,' and '*unsavoury wessels*' and '*flesh-pots of Egypt*,' and a lot of hard names which I don't recolleck now. It

quite made me whimper myself to see such good people blackguarding their own selves in such a outrageous fashion; and thinkin' that the sooner they got into better sperrets the more they'd be pleased, I draw'd the corks and poured out the wine. But when I handed it to the fust lady, she groaned awful, shaked her head, and exclaimed, '*I ain't worthy of it!*'—Then I went to t'other lady; and she groaned more awfuller still, and said the same thing. But Mr. Sneaksby says, says he, '*Yes, my Christian sisters; you may take it for your stomach's sake, as Timothy did.*'—And so I suppose the poor dear ladies was troubled with the colic; and they drank off the wine without no more hesitation. I then left 'em; and they returned to their devotions——"

"How do you know *that*, Mrs. Piggleberry?" inquired Meagles.

"Why, sir," answered the widow, blushing and growing embarrassed; "to tell the truth I listened at the door for a little bit—for I was afeard the ladies would do themselves a mischief through beatin' their buzzims so unmerciful."

"And did they exchange any more *kisses of peace?*" asked Lady Letitia, perfectly enjoying Mrs. Piggleberry's description.

"Yes—a many, sir," responded the good woman, ingenuously. "The ladies remained with Mr. Sneaksby for an hour; and then they went away in their carriage. But they was so overcome with their feelin's that they could scarcely walk straight—and they was evidently staggerin' under the weight of wery painful emotions."

"Did they finish the two bottles of wine?" demanded Meagles, exchanging a sly look with the Amazon.

"Oh! yes, sir—every drop," answered Mrs. Piggleberry.

"Ah! then we can pretty well guess what sort of emotions they were staggering under," observed Meagles, drily.

The landlady affected not to catch this remark: for it was a principle—or rather a prudential reservation—with her, never to observe or seem to hear anything that tended to the disparagement of those lodgers who paid her well and allowed her free access to their cupboards and trunks.

"Now, then, my good woman," said Meagles, "you can go and settle that little business between Mr. Brogden and my young scamp of a page, Wasp."

"Thank'ee kindly, sir, for the trouble you've taken in the little trifling matter," returned Mrs. Piggleberry, who had not, however, much to be grateful for—seeing that Mr. Meagles had not even stirred from his seat to procure the restoration of Mr. Brogden's peruque.

The landlady curtseyed and left the room; and the moment the door closed behind her, Tim Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade burst each into a violent fit of laughter.

"Well, upon my honour," exclaimed the former, as soon as his mirth had so far subsided as to allow him to give utterance to his thoughts, "this is the finest fun I ever heard in all my life. The new lodger is evidently some sanctified scoundrel whom amorous old dowagers run after. We must invite him to pass an evening with us, my beauty."

"Capital!" cried the Amazon, who had laughed till the tears ran down her flushed cheeks, where they resembled pearls upon rose-leaves. "But I must leave you now, Tim," she added, after a brief pause. "Sir John made me promise that I would return to sup with him; and as he so generously gave me the money we required to buy up the Marquis de Bellois' papers and the half of the document from Mr. Page, I must humour him a trifle."

"Very good," observed Meagles. "I suppose it is little the old fellow requires of you besides your company occasionally?"

"You naughty, good-for-nothing fellow, Tim!" exclaimed the beautiful huntress, bestowing upon his cheek a slight smack, rather resembling a caress, with her pretty hand. "I shall not answer such questions, sir. Good night."

"Good night, my beauty," responded Meagles, pressing his lips to the Amazon's moist mouth. "You will come and see me to-morrow; and perhaps I shall have some funny things to tell you with regard to the new lodger."

"Oh! we must amuse ourselves at his expense," exclaimed the huntress;—and having drawn on her gloves, fixed the becoming hat upon her head, and taken up her riding-whip, she quitted the house.

Not many minutes had elapsed after her departure, when the mischievous page, whom Mrs. Piggleberry denominated Master Wasp, entered the room bearing a letter which had just arrived.

We have already described this precocious youth as being slim—genteel—and good-looking: we may now add that his countenance was intellectual and pleasing—his eyes large, black, and sparkling—and his teeth excellent. But there was a little lurking devil of good-tempered mischief in the expression of those eyes; and, notwithstanding the demure aspect which he put on in the presence of his master, it was easy to perceive that he was naturally full of fun and frolic. In her heart Mrs. Piggleberry detested him: she was however too good a judge to offend an individual who might prejudice Mr. Meagles against her, and who was moreover well acquainted with the little pilferings which she practised in reference to that gentleman's larder.

"Well, you young rascal," exclaimed Meagles, in a tone which he vainly endeavoured to render severe; "what the deuce have you been doing with Mr. Brogden's wig?"

"Me, sir!" ejaculated the page, affecting the most startled amazement. "I can assure you, sir, that Mr. Brogden has got his wig on his head at this very moment."

"Yes—because you have given it back to him," replied Meagles. "Come—let us have no more of this nonsense in future, Wasp—or else Mrs. Piggleberry will give me notice to quit."

"Not she, indeed, sir!" cried the boy. "Why, you are house-rent, washing, taxes, breakfast, dinner, and supper to her—aye, and clothes to all her poor relations into the bargain. She won't get rid of you, sir, in a hurry."

"Well, well—I dare say it is so," murmured Meagles, hastily. "Come—give me that letter; and tell Mrs. Piggleberry to get me a broiled fowl for my supper."

"Yes, sir," answered Wasp;—and away he went to execute the order he had just received.

"Who the deuce can this be from?" exclaimed Meagles aloud, as he turned the letter over and over. "Black-edged paper—a beautiful female hand—a

small seal, with mourning wax —— Egad! it must be from the poor orphan, Rose Foster!"

Then, hastily breaking it open, his eyes glanced over the contents, which ran as follow:—

"The generous interest which you have shown in my unhappy lot, and the kind assistance and counsel which you have given me in my otherwise friendless condition, would indeed experience but an ungrateful return were I not to make you acquainted with the resolution to which I have come, after very mature consideration. You may perhaps think that it is improper, and even indelicate on my part, to have given way to reflections of a worldly nature so soon—so very soon after the cruel and terrible bereavement which I have experienced. But it is precisely because the sense of this bereavement is intolerable in the long and unemployed hours I pass by myself, that I have determined to seek an occupation which may to some extent relieve my mind from incessant meditation on the loss of my beloved and lamented parents. Besides, I feel that, situated as I am, it is a sin to remain idle, and that every day which is passed by me in inactivity and in brooding over my misfortunes, is the wilful abandonment of an irretrievable portion of my youth to an unavailing despair. Employment, I feel, will tutor my soul to resignation; and although I can never cease to think of my lost parents, and must often —often drop tears to their memory, yet I am well assured that constant occupation will mellow down my grief to a sentiment of placid submission to the divine will.

"Under all these circumstances, I feel convinced that you will approve of the resolution I have adopted, and the step I have taken. Before you receive this letter, I shall have entered a large and most respectable millinery establishment, the mistress of which carries the excellence of her heart and the kindness of her soul in her frank, honest, and open countenance. I shall therefore be enabled to earn my bread, without making any farther inroads upon the sum which remained from the amount paid by the Prince and after the settlement of Messrs. Hodson and Morley's claim. That sum will therefore remain to accumulate in the Bank of England, where, under your counsel, I deposited it.

"In the establishment where I shall be when you receive this note, I have entered under an assumed name. I do not wish the mention of that of *Foster* to provoke curiosity and lead to questions concerning the lamentable death of my beloved parents. I am convinced that you will approve of my resolution in this respect.

"But now I am about to write something which may appear ungrateful: I however beseech you to view it altogether in another light. Fearful that you may think the step I have taken to be premature and that the avocation I have chosen is derogatory to a young lady well and tenderly brought up,—and apprehending that, under these impressions, you may seek to wean me from my purpose, I dare not for the present inform you where that establishment which I am about to enter is situated. But when my mind has become more settled, and I have given this new mode of life a fair trial, I will then write to you again and ask you to call and see me. For I shall ever regard you as a friend whom God raised up to shield my father's memory from any blame which the result of a Coroner's Inquest would have attached to it,—as a friend, also, to counsel and assist myself. Accept, then, Mr. Meagles, my profound gratitude; and believe me when I declare that I shall ever entertain a deep sense of the obligations under which I exist towards you.

"ROSE FOSTER."

"She has acted wisely—prudently!" said Meagles to himself, when he had terminated the reading of this epistle. "The delicacy of her innocent mind has suggested to her that it would be improper for a friend of my sex to visit her in her new abode—and she is right. But God knows that I would sooner have cut my hand off than injure a hair of her sweet head! Ah! what—a tear trickling down my cheek! Well—be it so—and I am not ashamed of it! May your existence prove a happy one, sweet Rose; and perdition seize the villain who shall seek to do you harm!"

Having thus mused aloud, Tim Meagles hastily passed his hand across his eyes, and then drained the tumbler of reeking punch which stood near him; for he felt moved—affected—unmanned!

O man of the world that thou wast—rake and debauchee though thou mightest have been — yet thine heart was good: and the drops which then trickled down thy cheeks, were an atonement for many vices and many errors! Flowing like the spring from the hard and sterile rock in the desert, the tears of a man are the waters of hope gushing forth from even a rugged nature: like the vinegar upon granite, they dissolve obduracy into the softness of holy and blessed feelings!

CHAPTER LII

NEWGATE.

The clock of Saint Sepulchre's church was striking eleven in the forenoon, when Mrs. Brace, accompanied by Harriet, alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of the prison of Newgate.

They entered the dark and gloomy vestibule, where the chains of notorious malefactors were suspended to the walls—as if crime must have its relics and justice treasure up its memorials!

The turnkey on duty inquired the business of the lady and her attendant; and the milliner instantly placed a piece of paper in his hand. It was an order, signed by one of the City Aldermen, "to admit Mrs. Brace and friends to view his Majesty's prison of Newgate."

"Now, then, Soper!" exclaimed the turnkey, at the top of his voice; and a short, stout, dirty-looking individual woke up from a nap which he was enjoying as he lay stretched at length upon a form. "Two ladies to see the gaol. Come—bustle about now—and be alive, will'ee? Why, I'm blowed if you've slept off last night's ale yet?"

"Keep your observations to yourself, Mr. Pigman," growled Mr. Soper, as he with difficulty suppressed a yawn. "This way, ladies, if you'll be so kind."

And taking up a bunch of huge keys, he opened a large grated door leading into a dark passage. Mrs. Brace and Harriet followed him; and he conducted them into a low hall, paved with massive flag-stones, and the roof of which was supported by thick square pillars. At the end of this hall, a door opened to a staircase leading up into the chapel; and this was the first feature of interest which was inspected by the visitresses.

High—narrow—and dark, the chapel of Newgate is indeed well suited for the place. Its sombre aspect —the dark wood of which the pulpit, galleries, and pews are made—and the absence of all sounds from without, combine to render it a place of awful gloom. In the times of which we are writing, and indeed until within the last few years, there was a large circular enclosure in the middle, where persons doomed to death were seated to hear the "condemned sermon." Now-a-days a chair for the wretched culprit occupies that spot; and the authorities thus render the unhappy being painfully conspicuous and

shockingly prominent. Oh! our's indeed are blood-thirsty—atrocious—and sanguinary laws; and they necessarily render all their administrators, agents, and myrmidons cruel and heartless likewise.

"There, ladies," said Mr. Soper, "you see the gallery where we puts the vimen; and that's the gallery for the men. They're separated you see: cos vy—morals afore everything. In this here round pew," he continued, pointing to the enclosure which we have already noticed, "the gallows' birds sits. On them Sundays when there's a condemned sermon, the place is quite crowded with all your fine lords and ladies from the Vest End, and with the families of the City authorities. Lord bless ye, ma'am," he added, turning towards Mrs. Brace, "it's as good as a play to the fashionable folk; but I often thinks to myself, thinks I, '*What a precious cruel and heartless set the wealthy and the great of this country are, to be sure!*'"

The milliner made no reply: but she doubtless thought that the man was not far wrong;—otherwise she would perhaps have taken the trouble to express her dissent from his observation.

"Now we'll wisit the vimen's room," said Mr. Soper; and he accordingly led the way into the wing tenanted by the female prisoners.

The moment the door of that compartment was thrown open, the ears of Mrs. Brace and Harriet were saluted by licentious songs, obscene jests, and terrible imprecations; and they drew back, shuddering from head to foot.

"Lord, this is nothing, I can assure ye, ladies," exclaimed the man: then raising his voice to the highest pitch of its gruff intonation, he vociferated, "Now, then, you vimen, hold your jaw, will'ee?—or else I'll tell the guv'ner and stop your meat at dinner-time to-day."

The females held their peace for a short interval: but it was not through respect for Mr. Soper's command, nor in dread of his menace. Their curiosity was suddenly excited by the arrival of visitors.

And now what a revolting spectacle met the eyes of Mrs. Brace and the lady's-maid! In a large apartment, along one side of which the beds were arranged like shelves, three deep, and reminding one of the berths in a ship's cabin, a number of hideous-looking women were assembled. The air was hot and fetid: the beds were all in disorder, dirty, and miserable. Some of the females were evidently in a state bordering upon intoxication, even at that early hour in the forenoon; and their flushed countenances were rendered more disgusting by the tangled, matted, or dishevelled state of their hair—their torn, loose, negligent, and filthy apparel—their bold looks—and the air of savage ferocity and hardened sin which stamped their features.

Having indulged in a good long stare at the visitors, some of the most daring of these wretches surrounded Mrs. Brace and Harriet, demanding money; and the milliner, with a sickening sensation at the heart, hastened to distribute some small silver coins amongst them. They expressed their pleasure in characteristic terms of revolting coarseness;—and Soper conducted Mrs. Brace and the maid into an adjoining ward.

"Them's the misdemeanant vimen that you've just seen," he observed, as he closed the huge door of the first apartment. "Now you're going to wisit the female felons."

Again were the ears of the visitors saluted with libidinous songs, obscene jests, and horrid oaths as they entered the second ward; and again were those voices extinguished for a few minutes by the presence of the milliner and her abigail.

The occupants of this room were not so uniformly revolting as those in the former;—and yet they were a worse class of criminals, so far as the shades of iniquity are defined. But the misdemeanants were chiefly drunken wretches who had committed savage assaults—brothel-keepers—the lowest description of prostitutes—and old charwomen and washerwomen who had been committed for illegally pawning: whereas the female felons consisted of the dashing woman of the town who had perpetrated a robbery—the servant who had stolen in her master's dwelling-house—the young creature who had murdered her illegitimate child—the well-dressed shop-lifter—the poor seamstress who had disposed of the materials given her to make up—the lady who had robbed her furnished lodgings—the starving mother who had thieved a loaf for her famishing children—the receiver of stolen goods—the female swindler—and the old bawd in whose house some iniquitous deed had been committed. For in Newgate, up to this very hour, no attempt at classification—beyond the mere division of the misdemeanants and the felons—has ever been made;—and thus the novice in crime herds with those who have grown gray in iniquity!

Is not this infamous?—is it not shocking in the extreme? And then the Legislature affects to wonder that crime should be upon the increase! How can it be otherwise? What effort is made to reform the offender?—what wholesome scheme is adopted to reclaim and restore him to society? None—none;—and nine-tenths of the wretched beings who crowd the felons' gaols, the hulks, and the penal settlements, and who ascend the accursed scaffold, are not so much the victims of their own misdeeds, as of that atrocious apathy and abominable neglect which are exhibited by those who have the power of reforming and ameliorating the condition of prison discipline. The poor and the ignorant in this wretched enslaved country are *made* poor and *kept* ignorant by the rascally and detestable oligarchy;—and when John Bull boasts of the freedom and excellence of his institutions, he is a prejudiced, bigotted, narrow-minded, and besotted fool. Oh! my heart bleeds when I think of the wrongs which the *millions* endure at the hands of the *few*; and there are times when I feel ashamed, degraded and humiliated at having been born an Englishman, and wish to God that I was a Frenchman or an American!

For at this moment true freedom exists only in the United States and in France;—and it is a loathsome mockery, a foul lie, and a burning shame to vaunt even the enjoyment of a shadow of liberty in England!

Again in the female felons' ward was Mrs. Brace's purse opened;—and, having dispensed some money amongst society's poor outcasts there, she followed Soper, who led the way to the quadrangle occupied by the males,—Harriet keeping close behind her mistress.

In the misdemeanants' apartment, a sad spectacle of human demoralisation and abasement met the eyes of the visitors. Old men—young men—and boys were wasting their time in gaming, singing flash songs, relating anecdotes of villany or debauchery, exchanging ribald jests, wrestling, or sparring. The ward was in the utmost disorder, and filthy to a degree. The

atmosphere was suffocating and fetid; the bedding was tossed about in all directions;—and the table was strewed with pewter-pots, broken pipes, and tobacco ashes. For at the period of which we are writing, the prisoners were allowed to expend their money freely; and the turnkeys and ward-keepers reaped a rich harvest by supplying indulgences to those who had the coin wherewith to procure them.

In the felons' apartment the assemblage was as motley as that in the misdemeanants' ward. There, likewise, the mere boy who had commenced his noviciate in crime by thieving a handkerchief, was thrown into the society of the accomplished housebreaker; and the friendless orphan who had pilfered a loaf was placed within the contaminating influence of the desperate highwayman. The miserable urchin who had filched a piece of bacon from a cheesemonger's shop-board was classed with the ferocious resurrectionist or the daring burglar;—and the young clerk who had embezzled a few shillings of his master's money and was sincerely, bitterly repentant, found himself compelled to associate with the swell-mob's-man, the coiner, the smasher, the incendiary, and the returned convict.

"Them's four of the gang which was committed the day before yesterday," whispered Soper to Mrs. Brace, as he pointed to two persons who sate together at a table, and two others who were in conversation at one of the windows.

The first pair thus indicated, consisted of Martin and Ramsey. The once luxurious, proud, and respected bankers of Aylesbury were now as woebegone as fallen men well could be. Their pale countenances—downcast looks—and subdued tone, were strong indications of the awful sense which they entertained of their degraded condition and of the terrible doom which most probably awaited them;—while their unbrushed clothes—soiled linen—and neglected toilette proved how deficient were the conveniences and how slight were their inclinations to render themselves decent in that loathsome place.

From the persons of Martin and Ramsey the eyes of Mrs. Brace turned towards the other two individuals who had been pointed out to her, and who were conversing at the window. These were Briggs and the Beggarman: but scarcely had the milliner caught a glimpse of the latter, when a sudden vertigo seized upon her—and, staggering back, she would have fallen on the floor, had not the lady's-maid caught her in her arms.

"Holloa! here's a blowen a-faintin'!" cried half-a-dozen coarse voices; and several of the inmates of the room were rushing towards Mrs. Brace in the hope of being enabled to secure her purse or any trinkets which she might have about her—when the milliner, suddenly recovering her self-possession, hurried from the apartment.

Harriet was close at her heels—and Soper banged the door violently in the faces of the felons who were thus coming officiously forward with the ostensible purpose of rendering assistance.

"It was the close air of that room," murmured Mrs. Brace, leaning against the wall in the passage and drawing a long breath; while she inwardly congratulated herself on escaping the observation of the Big Beggarman during the few minutes she had remained in the felons' ward.

For it will be remembered that this individual was the Magsman's companion on that occasion when the milliner's house in Pall Mall was broken into during the night; and therefore Mrs. Brace and the Beggarman were no strangers to each other. We should likewise observe that as she was unacquainted with the fellow's real nomenclature as well as with his nick-name, she had not gleaned from the newspapers the fact that the Magsman's associate in the burglary at her dwelling was one of the gang so recently arrested and now in Newgate.

"Yes—I des say it were the stink of the place that made your missus ill," observed Mr. Soper to Harriet. "It's quite enow to breed a plague—and I wery often wonder that it don't. The City authorities wouldn't care a cuss if it did. But, come along, ma'am," he added, turning towards Mrs. Brace: "you're quite rekivered now—and I'll show you the condemned cells. It's in one of them that we've been obleeged to put the 'torious Joe Warren—better knowed as the Magsman—on account of his being sich a owdacious feller that's it quite a blessin' there's any walls strong enough at all to keep him close. This way, ma'am."

Thus speaking, the man conducted Mrs. Brace and Harriet into a corridor whence opened five cells. This was on the ground-floor;—and he explained that there was the same number of cells on each of the two floors above. Mrs. Brace knew this already—as indeed she was acquainted with the situation of every ward, passage, and staircase which she had just visited: for she had a complete plan of Newgate at that very moment about her person!

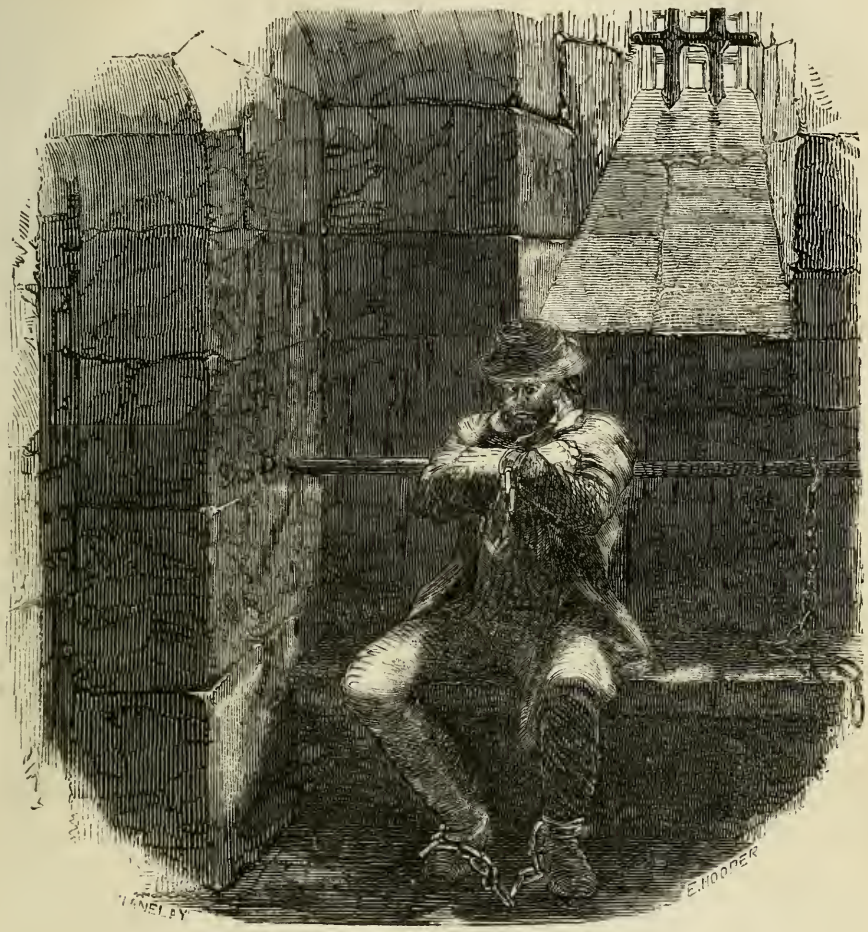
"Now, ma'am," said Mr. Soper, in a whisper, "you shall see that terrible fellow which you've no doubt heerd of, and whose name is in all the newspapers."

A cold shudder passed through the frame of the milliner, striking to her very heart's core, as this announcement met her ears: for she knew that she was about to appear in the presence of her husband! Not that she apprehended any recognition on his part: the Gallows' Widow had succeeded in conveying to him, through the agency of the Kinchin Grand, an intimation of the probable visit of Mrs. Brace and its object;—and that this had been done the milliner was well aware. But she trembled because she loathed the idea of acting as an accomplice, even in so covert a manner, in any scheme with which her brutal husband was connected. Unhesitatingly would this woman assist any one of her aristocratic patrons in the seduction, or even the rape, of a virgin victim: but her exquisite refinement was shocked at the thought of mixing herself up with a Magsman or a Gallows' Widow, even though the former was her own husband. Oh! how strange a thing is conscience,—sometimes concealing itself in the heart's innermost recesses, and there remaining voiceless,—at other times speaking loud and trumpet-tongued in the ear!

The heavy bolts were drawn back—the key turned with a crashing sound in the lock—and the door of the cell which was last in the row, and consequently at the extreme end of the corridor, swung heavily round upon its hinges.

The eyes of Mrs. Brace instantly met those of the Magsman; and, although he gave not the slightest sign of recognition, she could nevertheless perceive that a grim smile of satisfaction swept rapidly over his countenance.

The cell in which the Magsman was confined, resembled a massive sepulchre. It was nearly



nine feet high—ten in length—and about six in breadth. The vaulted ceiling — the stone pavement—the window double grated, and high up—the tremendous thickness of the wall, as shown by the depth of the loop-hole in which that small window was set—the oaken door which a nail four inches long could not completely perforate,—and the heavy irons which the Magsman wore,—all these appearances struck the milliner, as her glance rapidly embraced them, with the impossibility of any one, however strong and daring, effecting an escape from that living tomb!

Nevertheless, she resolved to accomplish the aim of her visit; and addressing herself to the prisoner as an excuse for advancing into the cell, she said, "I hope you will repent of your errors and confess your crimes, as the only atonement you can make to that society whose laws you have outraged."

"Well, ma'am," responded the Magsman, who fully comprehended her motive, and therefore answered her in a respectful tone,—"I take your advice as it is meant—that is, in good part. But I should wish you to tell me what mercy I am likely to receive by making any confession at all."

Mrs. Brace proceeded to expatiate on the necessity of the prisoner's averting his thoughts and hopes from this world and fixing them all upon the next; and while she was thus playing the hypocrite for a particular purpose, Harriet, who had already been duly instructed by her mistress, was engaging the attention of Soper in the passage. She asked a thousand questions connected with the prison, and so ably succeeded in occupying him for several minutes, that the milliner easily found the wished-for opportunity of slipping a small parcel into the Magsman's hand —continuing her religious exhortation until he had safely secured it about his own person.

"Well, ma'am," he observed at last, "I've lis-

tened to you with the respect due to a lady of your appearance: but I really don't wish to hear any more. As for confession—that's all gammon; and if I must swing, I shall die game."

Mrs. Brace lifted her hands as if in despair of converting him, and, turning away, issued from the cell. Mr. Soper closed the massive door—locked and bolted it again—and then conducted the milliner and her attendant to the other quarters of the prison.

But thither we shall not follow them: suffice it to say that, having inspected the remainder of the gaol, the visitors took their departure, leaving Mr. Soper well contented with the recompense which he had received for his trouble

CHAPTER LIII.

THE MYSTERIES OF OLD PAINTINGS.

In the times whereof we are writing, the house which stood next to Newgate, in the street that borrows its name from the prison, was occupied by a picture-dealer. This house was about fifteen feet higher than the gaol; and a person might easily let himself down from the roof of the former to the leads of the latter.

The picture-dealer was a man considerably advanced in years: or, to speak more accurately, he was verging upon sixty-five. He was a widower—had no children—and, being excessively parsimonious, kept but a small establishment in the shape of domestics. An old woman performed the duties of housekeeper, cook, and maid-of-all-work: a slipshod, hungry-looking boy attended in the shop when his master was otherwise engaged;—and the third floor was occupied by an artist whom the picture-dealer retained constantly in his employment for purposes which will almost immediately transpire.

Mr. Shrubsole—for that was the euphonious name of the picture-dealer—was a tall, thin man, with a pale countenance, a bald head fringed with white hair, and large eyes of that dull hue which, being a mixture of light gray and green, gave them the appearance of having been boiled. His mouth had fallen in, because he had not a single tooth left in his head; and his nose being particularly pointed, the outlines of his profile were sharp and angular. His attirewas a seedy suit of black, which age and dirt had rendered rusty and brown; and he usually wore an apron dingy in hue and smeared with paint and varnish. Add a massive pair of silver spectacles, with large circular glasses, to his countenance, and huge buckles of the same metal to his shoes, and you have before your eyes a complete portraiture of Mr. Shrubsole.

The shop was narrow, but high and long. The windows were very seldom cleaned—the floor never; and the ceiling was as black as a ceiling, that once was white, well could be. The place was always involved in a semi-obscurity, even in the most glorious summer's day: but in the winter time it was particularly sombre. This, however, the old man was wont to represent as the very best light in which real judges and connoisseurs could possibly wish to view paintings; and when evening came, or a fog prevailed in the City, he would distribute half-a-dozen wretched candles, twenty to the pound, about the shop, and then vow that it was a perfect illumination.

Notwithstanding the sordid appearance of the shop itself, it contained a great number of paintings. All the different Schools, whether ancient or modern, were represented in that congress of pictures; and it seemed as if all imaginable subjects and branches of the art had exercised the right of universal suffrage to send suitable members to that assembly. Portraits, landscapes, naval and military battles, river-scenes, animals, flowers, cities, ruins, angels, devils, historical and religious designs,—in a word, every description of subject might be viewed and selected in Mr. Shrubsole's "Gallery of Art." And if the visitor were not satisfied with what he beheld on the ground-floor, he was escorted to the first and second storeys, all the rooms of which were likewise filled with pictures.

Any individual who was not somewhat initiated in the mysteries of Mr. Shrubsole's trade, would have fancied that he possessed the finest collection of paintings in all the world, and that he must be a man of enormous wealth. For Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Correggios, Titians, Guidos, Rembrandts, Vandykes, Claudes, Poussins, Murillos, Hogarths, &c., were as plentiful in Mr. Shrubsole's establishment as blackberries on any hedge in England at the proper season.

We shall presently ascertain how it was that Mr. Shrubsole became possessed of such splendid pictures, all by the great masters; but before we enter more profoundly into the mysteries of his trade, we must observe that at the farther end of the shop, and in the very darkest nook, there hung in a massive frame a piece of canvass painted all over a very dark and dingy brown, unrelieved by a single shade or outline indicative of a picture.

It was mid-day; and Mr. Shrubsole was in his shop, surveying the various master-pieces with an ineffable complacency,—while the boy was getting his dinner behind a Vandyke that was leaning against the wall.

Presently a short, stout, elderly, pragmatical gentleman entered the establishment; and, tapping the ferule of his gold-headed cane sharply upon the floor, he said, "A friend of mine has placed your catalogue in my hands; and I have come to see the pictures accordingly. But mind—I'm a tolerable good judge, I flatter myself—and I shall very soon discover whether they are the originals or only copies."

"If you find any copies here, sir," responded Shrubsole, "I'll eat 'em."

"Well—you can say nothing fairer," observed the gentleman, taking the picture-dealer's answer very seriously; and, placing himself in an attentive attitude, he began to survey the large painting behind which the boy was devouring a sausage and slice of bread.

"Splendid altar-piece, that!" said Mr. Shrubsole, after a pause. "The great master's hand visible in every tint—characteristic brilliancy of style—splendour and richness of colouring, eh? Look at that Saint in the foreground—he literally seems to stand out of the canvass."

Still the elderly gentleman made no reply—but kept his looks intently fixed upon the painting, just for all the world as if he were criticising it most minutely. But Mr. Shrubsole had already seen through him as completely as if his entire form were

made of glass; and the wily old fellow knew that his customer was one of those self-sufficient, conceited, and purse-proud individuals who affect to be connoisseurs in an art of which they are utterly ignorant.

"That masterpiece," continued Shrubsole, "was painted by Vandyke for the Cathedral at Genoa. There it remained until three years ago, when a new altar was erected; and the picture was sold for a thousand guineas to a Genoese nobleman. The nobleman sent it as a present to King George III; but his Majesty not admiring Catholic subjects, gave it to my Lord Skimmington. His lordship gave it to his mistress, Signora Borlini, the famous singer; and she, being in want of cash the other day, sold it to me. I can let it go for five hundred—and that is dirt cheap."

"It is not dear, Mr. Shrubsole, I admit," said the elderly gentleman, at last breaking silence and turning slowly round with a very knowing air. "No—it is not dear. It's a real Vandyke—you couldn't deceive *me* if it wasn't, I can tell you. It's certainly a splendid thing. The Saint, as you say, in the foreground is admirable: he seems to be absolutely walking into the background. Ah! you perceive I'm *rather* a good judge of pictures—eh?" added the elderly gentleman, with a knowing wink of the left eye.

"I was certain of *that*, sir, the very first moment you began to look at my Vandyke," said Mr. Shrubsole. "You surveyed it with the air and manner of a connoisseur."

"Well—I think I *do* know a good picture when I see one," returned the elderly gentleman, highly delighted at the compliment paid him. "Come—I don't mind saying four hundred guineas for the Vandyke—cheque at sight."

"I couldn't do it, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole: then, in a milder tone, he added, "No—I couldn't do it, really—much as I like dealing with any gentleman who knows how to value and appreciate fine paintings—as *you* do, sir."

"Well, well—I see I must not beat you down too much," resumed the customer, still more highly flattered by this last appeal to his vanity. "Let us say four hundred and fifty—and then, perhaps, I may be induced to purchase another picture before I leave the shop."

"On those conditions we can agree," said Mr. Shrubsole.

"Good!" ejaculated the pragmatical gentleman, while the ferule of his stick again rang sharply on the floor. "Now let me examine some more of this really fine collection. Have you a good Rembrandt?"

"Behold!" said the picture-dealer, pointing to a portrait of a Delilah, which was almost a mass of black, with a vivid streak of light stretching from the upper corner on the left hand, and ceasing at the lady's nose, one side of which it perfectly irradiated, while the other was as dark as if it had never been painted at all.

"Fine—very fine—splendid effect!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, after a long scrutiny and an equally protracted silence. "Wonderful conception—sublime creation! But I have heard—in fact I know that there *are* Rembrandts in which the light is not so vividly pourtrayed. For *my* opinion is, Mr. Shrubsole," he added, with a remarkably knowing air, "that the dark pictures are the finest specimens of the old masters. I mean, you understand," he continued pompously, "those magnificent works in which the colours are—ahem!—so deep and the shades so—so—ahem!—so solemn and imposing in their obscurity, that to the inexperienced eye the whole picture seems nothing more or less than a black mass,—whereas *we*, Mr. Shrubsole—*we*, who are connoisseurs, can soon distinguish the fine portrait like an angelic countenance peeping forth from the midst of a night intensely dark."

"Ah! my dear sir," exclaimed the picture-dealer, throwing into his hatchet-face as warm an expression of rapture as such mummy-features could possibly assume; "you do indeed enjoy an intimate acquaintance with the peculiarities of style and the sublime characteristics which distinguished the old masters. You are an enthusiast—like me! Come, then, my dear sir—come—and feast your eyes upon the most magnificent specimen of the art which the immortal Rembrandt has left behind him!"

"Is it possible that you possess such a specimen?" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, working himself up into a perfect fit of enthusiasm.

"I do indeed, sir," responded Shrubsole: and, lighting a miserable candle, he led the way to the extremity of the shop. "There, sir—there, brother connoisseur!" he ejaculated, in a tone of triumph, and pointing to the canvass which we have already described as being painted all over a very dark and dingy brown, and not having the slightest trace of any picture at all.

The elderly gentleman planted himself at what he conceived to be a proper distance in order to view the magnificent work of art; and a feeling of profound respect and veneration came over him as he fixed his eyes on the canvass. His countenance assumed a very solemn expression; and he gazed long—intently—and silently. As a matter of course he could distinguish nothing: all was a dark and obscure void;—but not for worlds would he have compromised his reputation as a connoisseur by turning round to the picture-dealer and frankly exclaiming, "May I be hanged if I can trace a single thing or discover a single outline!"

"You have placed yourself in an admirable position to see it to advantage," said Mr. Shrubsole, taking his own stand near the frame which enclosed the daub, and holding the candle high up. "There! now you catch the light upon the countenance. Does it not appear gradually to reveal itself to you, like a person emerging slowly from the mouth of a dark cavern? Now you begin to see the richness of the colouring—mark the life-like effect with which the cheeks are painted—behold the expression of those speaking eyes! Ah! now the light falls on the nose—and you catch the perfect outline of the profile! Some people—clever men, too—have declared that the picture is a trifle more sombre than it ought to be: but you and I, sir, know better. *You* at least can appreciate the beauty—the excellence—the magnificence of this inimitable painting."

"Yes—it is indeed wonderful!" observed the elderly gentleman, shaking his head solemnly, but at the same time fruitlessly straining his eyes to catch even the remotest glimpse of a single one of all the features which the picture-dealer had enumerated: and, for the life of him, he could not conceive what on earth the subject of the painting might be.

But he dared not ask a question—he dared not suffer it to appear that he was in a state of complete mental obfuscation: for if he seemed even for a single moment to be in the dark concerning that picture—as indeed he most assuredly was—his reputation as a connoisseur would be destroyed for ever. Vainly did he torture his imagination to persuade itself that he really did see something: no—the canvass was an awful void, or rather a mass of unvaried darkness save where the glimmer of the farthing candle flickered upon it;—and yet Mr. Shrubsole said it *was* a picture—and gazed upon it as if it were—and therefore a picture, thought the elderly gentleman, it certainly must be!

"Well, my dear sir—are you not delighted—are you not enraptured?" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole, after another long and solemn silence. "Do you not feel an enthusiasm glowing in your veins?—do you not experience a sensation as if you could fall down and worship that master-piece of the immortal Rembrandt? Ah! my dear sir, to a connoisseur like you this is indeed the richest of treats—far, far exceeding the most luxurious banquet!"

"I confess that I am lost—bewildered—confused—astounded," said the elderly gentleman—and most assuredly he was. "I mean—I am amazed by the magnificence——"

"Oh! I can comprehend your feelings, my dear sir," interrupted the picture-dealer. "Do you not long to become the owner of this treasure?"

"What is the sum?" demanded the elderly gentleman: for he felt convinced that if *he* could make nothing of the subject of the paiuting, his family and friends would be equally in the dark—and he knew that his reputation as a connoisseur would rise to the very zenith by the mere fact of possessing a picture of such extraordinary merit that no one could understand it!

"Alas! my dear sir," said Mr. Shrubsole, forcing himself to heave a profound sigh,—"the badness of the times—the flatness of business—the state of the Money-Market—all combine to induce me to part with my Rembrandt for a mere song. Five hundred guineas—not a farthing less—and even then it will cost me a pang to lose my Rembrandt!"

"Five hundred guineas you shall have," said the elderly gentleman, emphatically. "It would be a desecration and a sacrilege to attempt to beat you down. But of course—that is, my dear sir—I suppose," added the customer, with a slight embarrassment in his tone and manner,—"you can get a paragraph inserted in the newspapers to the effect—ahem!—that your most valuable Vandyke and your Rembrandt master-piece have been purchased—ahem!—for a large sum by—ahem!—that liberal amateur and well-known connoisseur, Sir Brinksby Bull."

"What! is it indeed the famous Sir Slinksby Pull who has thus honoured my Gallery by his presence?" cried the old picture-dealer, affecting to survey his customer with the deepest reverence mingled with admiration: although, to tell the truth, he had never in his life heard the name before, and had even now caught it so imperfectly that he made a sad mess of the euphonious nomenclature when attempting to repeat it. "Then I am glad that my two best paintings have fallen to the possession of one who will know how to value them. My dear sir," he continued, "you have acquired perfect treasures this day. The pictures shall be dusted and cleaned, and sent to your mansion in the course of the week."

"Very good, Mr. Shrubsole!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, who was a retired grocer, and having been mayor of some town when the corporation thereof presented an address to the King had received the *honour* of Knighthood—since which occurrence he had settled, with Lady Brinksby Bull and all the little Brinksby Bulls, in a Square at the West End of London, where he gave grand parties and set himself up as a patron of the fine arts: although, as the reader may very well conceive, he was a much better judge of muscovado than of pictures.

However, Sir Brinksby wrote a check for nine hundred and fifty guineas—left his address—and strode pompously away, thinkiug how he should astonish all his friends and aristocratic acquaintances with his magnificent Rembrandt.

The moment the Knight's back was turned, Mr. Shrubsole rubbed his hands smartly together, and chuckled in a low mumbling tone, as old gentlemen are wont to do when they are hugely delighted: and having thus demonstrated his satisfaction, he exclaimed, "Now, Tom—where are you?"

"Here, sir," said a short, pale, thin, and dirty-looking urchin, as he emerged from behind the great picture.

"You must mind the shop for a little while," continued his master. "And remember, if any one comes in, this portrait is Admiral Drake," he added, pointing to a bluff-looking naval officer, with a small cocked hat perched on the top of a large wig.

"Why, sir—I thought he was Van Trump," exclaimed the boy.

"Van Tromp you mean!" cried Mr. Shrubsole. "Well—he has been Van Tromp for the last three weeks—and no one will buy a Dutch Admiral. So we must see whether the public can be tempted with an English one. And this portrait," continued the picture-dealer, pointing to a military commander, "has been Prince Eugene long enough. No one cares a curse about Prince Eugene. Let him be the Duke of Marlborough. Have we got a Marquis of Granby?"

"The last that Mr. Woodfall painted, sir, was sold yesterday," answered the boy.

"Well—this Marshal Turenne must be a Granby, then, in case anybody wants one. And while I think of it, Tom," added Mr. Shrubsole, "that Rubens in the window there had better be a Titian; and this picture which Mr. Woodfall painted last week, and which we baked yesterday, must be a Michael Angelo. Now, shall you remember all these instructions?"

"To be sure I shall, sir," returned the lad, with a knowing leer.

"Well—I've done a good afternoon's business—and here's a penny for you," said Mr. Shrubsole, placing the copper coin as carefully in the boy's hand as if it were a guinea, which he was fearful might drop and roll between the boards.

Having thus given the poor half-starved wretch a proof of his liberality, the picture-dealer ascended several flights of narrow, dark, and dilapidated stairs, and ultimately reached the third floor. There he entered a front room in which several pictures, resting on their easels, were distributed about. These works of art were in various stages towards comple-

tion; and their subjects were as varied and their respective style as different as those which were displayed for sale in the shop and apartments beneath. In fact, it was in this room that all Mr. Shrubsole's Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Correggios, Titians, Guidos, Rembrandts, Vandykes, Claudes, Poussins, Murillos, and Hogarths were composed and manufactured; and from that sordid-looking studio flowed the stream of "master-pieces" that supplied the picture galleries of the aristocratic and wealthy class throughout England.

And who was the artist that combined in his own person a glimmering reflection of the talents of all those great masters? The reader may perhaps suspect that the paintings were the veriest daubs in the universe: but such indeed they were not. On the contrary, they evinced immense skill, a profound acquaintance with the style of those originals of which they were imitations, and no small experience in producing fine effects. In a word, genius was stamped upon each and all; and if that genius were far inferior to the assemblage of models which it kept in view, it was nevertheless of no common order.

In the workshop, or studio, which we have just seen Mr. Shrubsole enter, a young man was busily employed with his palette and brushes. He was tall —thin—but symmetrical in proportions, and of a genteel appearance. His countenance was pale, without being absolutely sickly: and his large dark eyes flashed with the fire of genius. Coal black hair, silky and glossy as that of a woman, curled naturally above the high, noble, and intellectual forehead over which it was parted; and his whiskers, of the same jetty dye, met beneath his chin, the oval countenance thus being framed in ebony. His delicately pencilled brows were finely arched: he had the short and slightly curved upper lip which denoted a haughty disposition;—and his teeth were remarkably white and even. His toilette was plain, and even homely: but his linen was perfectly clean, his boots well blacked, and his clothes carefully brushed. When at work, he wore an apron, which reached half-way up his chest; and altogether his appearance was so neat and interesting that it not only contrasted strongly with the miserable aspect of the apartment, but was also widely different from the slovenliness and neglect which usually characterise men of that profession.

This young artist, whose age was certainly not more than five-and-twenty, was named George Woodfall; and he it was who, for a remuneration ridiculously moderate, touched up and altered the old pictures which his employer bought at sales and elsewhere, and likewise painted new ones. In fact, he was the author of the Michael Angelos, Rembrandts, and other "master-pieces" which Mr. Shrubsole disposed of as originals, and for which he obtained large sums.

"Well, my dear George," said the picture-dealer, as he entered the room: "hard at work—eh? Nothing like it—nothing like it! I have just sold the Vandyke—the Saints, you know? Let me see: that painting I bought at a sale in Wardour Street—and then you touched it up."

"Touched it up!" exclaimed the young man, indignantly: "I made it what it is—I converted it from a vile daub into something which, at all events, you have managed to pass off as a Vandyke. But how much did you obtain for it?" he asked, in a milder tone.

"A mere trifle—forty guineas," answered Shrubsole, telling this great falsehood without a blush and without the quivering of a muscle of his countenance. "I shall add half-a-guinea to your wages on Saturday night: I can't do more, as times go."

"Wages!—do you look upon me as a servant?" cried Woodfall, grinding his teeth. "Call it pittance —stipend—income—salary—anything you choose: but not wages!"

"Well — well — I didn't mean to offend you, George," said the picture-dealer, trembling at the young man's excitement. "But I have something else to inform you this afternoon. I've sold a Rembrandt."

"Which?" demanded Woodfall.

"Whichever you like to make it," responded Mr. Shrubsole, with a chuckling laugh.

"Ah! I see—you have been playing off the black canvass on the imagination of some simpleton," observed the young man. "Well — I can scarcely blame you. The world are so vain and conceited that they deserve to be taken in. Sooner than confess themselves ignorant, they will affect to see a picture where no picture exists. Oh! the contemptible fools—the drivelling idiots!"

"Come—don't excite yourself on that account, my dear young friend," said Mr. Shrubsole, laying his long, lean, withered hand upon the shoulder of the tall, graceful young man.

"Not I indeed," exclaimed Woodfall, with a contemptuous curl of the lip: "these miserable *ignorami* are not worth a sneer. But how much did you get from your customer by persuading him into the belief that a dark canvass was a splendid painting?"

"A trifle—a mere trifle—thirty guineas," responded Shrubsole, telling lie the second. "But I shall add *another* half-guinea to your wa —— salary," he cried, hastily correcting himself, "next Saturday night. Come—you must paint in a female Saint or some such thing on the dark canvass: a quarter of an hour in the oven will then give it a few cracks all over, and bestow an *ancient appearance* on it;—and perhaps we shall use a little meguelp or turpentine to subdue the freshness of the colouring, and make it look a *leetle* black and dirty."

"I will go down and fetch up the canvass at once," said Woodfall.

"Eh! that's a dear good young man. Lose no time about it. I'll just look at the pictures you've been working on to-day, till you come up again."

And while Mr. Shrubsole turned towards the partially finished paintings on their easels, the talented artist descended into the shop.

"Tom," he said, immediately accosting the boy, into whose hand he slipped a shilling; "how much did your master receive for that Vandyke?"

"Four hundred and fifty guineas, sir," was the reply.

"And for the pretended Rembrandt?" was Woodfall's next query.

"Five hundred guineas, sir," answered the lad.

"Thank you, Tom: you are a good boy—a very good boy," observed the artist, in a low and hurried tone—for he was afraid of being overheard by the picture-dealer. "And who was the purchaser?"

"Sir Brinksby Bull," returned Tom.

George Woodfall drew forth his pocket-book—made a few hasty memoranda—and then proceeded to carry the daubed canvass up to his workshop on the third floor.

By nine o'clock in the evening the outlines of a heavenly face had been sketched on that canvass; for the young artist worked unweariedly until the old female domestic called him to supper. This meal was served in the kitchen; and on the present occasion it was somewhat more bounteous in quantity and inviting in quality than usual—for the picture-dealer was slightly moved to liberality by the good business he had done that day.

After supper Mr. Shrubsole despatched the servant to the nearest tavern for two bottles of wine; and the party—consisting of the picture-dealer himself, the artist, the domestic, and the boy — sate drinking and conversing until the booming bell of St. Sepulchre's Church proclaimed the hour of eleven.

"Now, then—to-bed!" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole, rising from his seat with a partial degree of difficulty, and staggering somewhat as he extended his hand to grasp the chamber-candle.

At this moment there was a loud and imperious double-knock at the street door;—and the domestic hastened to respond to the summons. Those who remained behind in the kitchen heard her ascend the stairs—open the door—answer a few questions put to her by several voices, both male and female—and then admit the visitors into the passage, the door immediately afterwards closing behind them. All this did Mr. Shrubsole, George Woodfall, and the boy Tom hear as plainly as possible in the kitchen below: but suddenly a dead silence succeeded —and not another sound reached them after the echoes raised by the shutting of the street-door had died away.

"This is very ex—tri—traordinary," murmured Mr. Shrubsole, glancing with a kind of vacant uneasiness at the artist. "I could swear—hic—that—I—I heard people come—hic—into the—hic—hic—house."

"I will go and see," said Woodfall;—and, hastening out of the kitchen, he ascended the stairs.

It struck both the picture-dealer and Tom that they heard something like a short scuffle in the passage over-head: but if it were so, the conflict ceased almost instantaneously and was unmarked by a single cry for assistance. A solemn silence again prevailed;—and uselessly did Shrubsole hold his breath in the hope of catching the sounds of George Woodfall's returning footsteps. It appeared as if both the servant and the artist had been spirited away by some supernatural agency: for not a sound was heard—no, not even the rustling of a dress!

"Tom—Tom—the devil's in the house," whispered the picture-dealer, pretty well sobered by the terror arising from the mysterious occurrences of the last few minutes.

"Lord bless ye, sir!" returned the boy: "I'll be bound it's only a bit of fun of some kind or another. I'm not afraid."

And away he rushed up the staircase, purposely making his hob-nailed shoes clatter as heavily as he could upon the steps. The picture-dealer listened with suspended breath: he could tell when the boy reached the passage—and there he suddenly stopped. At the same instant a sharp noise, like that of a man's hand slapping a face or striking with the flat of the palm against a wall, fell on Shrubsole's ear. A short rapid scuffle followed;—and then all was still throughout the house, and silent as the grave.

The old man sank down upon a chair, gasping for breath; while his countenance, as the flickering gleams of a wretched candle played upon it, was hideous with the workings of excessive terror. His limbs trembled convulsively—his lips, white and bloodless, quivered like aspens—and his eyes glared wildly in the direction of the door leading to the dark staircase, as if he every moment expected that some grisly spectre would come forth from the obscurity.

Suddenly he started up: his fears goaded him to desperation;—and desperation gave him courage Thieves might be plundering his house, while he was sitting helplessly and pusillanimously in the kitchen.

Taking up the light, he ascended the stairs, holding the candle high above his head so as to throw its rays forward. But scarcely had he mounted half-a dozen steps, when something whizzed through the air—apparently coming from the passage: and in a moment the candle was struck from the old man's hand.

Uttering a loud cry, he fell back senseless;—and when consciousness slowly returned, he found himself seated by the kitchen fire, on which more coals had evidently been heaped. At the same instant he became aware that he was fastened by a strong cord, which bound him hand and foot, to the arm-chair wherein he had been so considerately placed.

A candle—the very one which had been dashed from his grasp by the well-aimed missile—was burning on the table;—and around the kitchen did Mr. Shrubsole now glance hastily. His fears—if his selfishness allowed him to entertain any apart from those which concerned his property and his gold—were immediately relieved in respect to the artist, the old female dependant, and the boy Tom;—for these three individuals were his companions—but each bound, like himself, to a chair.

"What—how—when——" stammered the bewildered picture-dealer, anxious to ask questions but unable to find words to frame them.

"Silence!" exclaimed a sharp imperious female voice close behind Mr. Shrubsole's chair; and at the same instant he felt something cold touch the back of his neck.

Throwing his body forward as far as the cords would permit, he hastily turned his head and beheld a woman, with a black crape mask over her countenance and a pair of horse-pistols in her hands, evidently mounting guard upon the four prisoners.

"Hold your tongue—and no harm shall happen to you, sir," continued the woman. "No robbery is intended—and it will be your fault if violence or bloodshed should ensue. Raise but your voice one note higher than you have already spoken, and I will send a bullet through your head without an instant's hesitation."

And again she placed the cold muzzle of a pistol behind his ear: for this woman appeared to play with the murderous weapons as if they had been familiar toys from her very birth.

"In fact, the shortest plan and the best," she continued, "is not to speak at all. This I have recommended to your three fellow-prisoners; and they are wisely following my counsel."

"Think not, woman," observed the young artist, irritated by this observation, "that my silence is occasioned by fear of you or your pistols. But, bound as I am to the chair, you may well suppose that I have little inclination to open my lips in discourse."

"I will give you credit, sir, for any motive you

please, so long as you do not speak too loud," said the woman.

George Woodfall made no answer: but a hollow moan escaped the picture-dealer; while the female servant heaved a profound sigh. As for the boy Tom—he dozed off into a comfortable nap;—and a deep silence now reigned in the kitchen and throughout the house.

CHAPTER LIV.

JOE WARREN IN NEWGATE.

We must now return to the Magsman, whom we left at the moment when Mrs. Brace, with a studied hypocrisy assumed in order to blind Mr. Soper, raised her hands and eyes in apparent despair at the prisoner's hardened nature.

The heavy door clanged again upon the solitary occupant of that cell: he heard the key turn in the lock and the bolts shoot into their sockets;—and then he waited until the sounds of the retreating footsteps died away in the passage.

But so soon as all was still—save the low rumbling of the vehicles in the adjacent street—the Magsman lost no more time ere he examined the parcel which his wife had so dexterously slipped into his hand. The contents thereof were as follow:—

1. A map, or plan, of Newgate.
2. A small file.
3. Four stout and well-pointed nails.
4. A cord of twisted silk, not much thicker than common string, but strong enough to sustain an immense weight.
5. Three pieces of iron, each about four inches in length and of the thickness of the thumb, and which were made to screw together so as to form a small but effective crowbar, or "jemmy."
6. A little piece of putty, mixed with black lead.

Such were the contents of the parcel; and, although miscellaneous and numerous, they were easily packed into a very limited compass. A grim smile of satisfaction passed over the Magsman's countenance as he examined those articles one after the other; and having secured the file, the nails, the ball of silken cord, the disjointed "jemmy," and the scrap of paper containing the morsel of putty, about his person, he proceeded to study and scrutinize the plan of Newgate.

We have already stated that he was confined in that condemned cell which stood last in the row of five on the ground-floor; and the map now before him showed that his cell was, as he had already suspected it to be, in the north-eastern angle of the gaol. The loop-hole looked upon Newgate Street; and the people passing along that thoroughfare, under the frowning wall, were within a yard of him. The eastern side of his dungeon joined Mr. Shrubsole's house.

We have also informed the reader that there were five condemned cells overhead, on the first floor; and another row of cells higher still, on the second floor: consequently there were two rooms between the ceiling of the Magsman's dungeon and the roof of the prison.

Having thus examined those details of the plan which especially concerned himself, the Magsman thrust the map into his pocket, and drew forth the file. This little instrument, scarcely larger than the blade of a pen-knife, was as admirably tempered as a watch-spring. The Magsman bent it into a complete circle, and it flew back into unimpaired straightness; and he knew thereby that a Sheffield workshop, and no imitative London manufactory, had produced the file.

Seating himself on the pavement-floor, and having spread his handkerchief to catch the glistening particles of metal, the Magsman began to file one of the huge links of his massive chains. To one less courageous, persevering, and experienced than himself, the task now undertaken would have appeared about as hopeful as an attempt to pull down a house with a nail: but Joe Warren knew well what he had to achieve, and the amount of work which the trusty file, with its sharp and irresistible teeth, could accomplish.

Presently, the clock of St. Sepulchre struck one. It was dinner time—and the Magsman hastened to conceal the file and gather up his handkerchief. Then, into the space which the file had opened in the half-severed link, he put some of the putty, which, being black and shining, corresponded so well with the iron that the most keen and piercing eyes could not have detected the process which was in operation.

Scarcely was this little arrangement made, when heavy footsteps were heard in the echoing passage—the bolts were drawn—the door was opened—and the man Soper appeared with a covered dish in one hand and a pot of beer in the other.

"Your friends take good care of you, old feller," said the gaol functionary, as he removed the cover from the dish, more out of curiosity than politeness. "Roast fowl, sassages, mashed taturs, and new bread—my eyes! don't you come it strong? A quart of strong beer, too: well, you ain't wery much to be pitied, I don't think. Your grub is a deuced sight better than gaol allowance."

"Will you sit down and have some dinner with me?" asked the Magsman.

"Can't stop—or else I would," responded Soper. "But I don't mind a drop of beer;"—and, with these words, he took a tolerable long draught. "I say, old feller," he observed, setting down the pot and wiping his mouth with his coat-sleeve, "your trial comes on the day arter to-morrow. I've just seed the calendar."

"Well—it can't be helped," said the Magsman. "I've made my mind up to the worst."

"The wery best thing you can do," responded Mr. Soper, intending his remark to be of a consolatory nature. "What a precious fine woman that was which I showed round the gaol just now! Such eyes—and such teeth—and such a bust! She give me half-a-guinea for my trouble. But I'm perwenting you from eating your dinner—and I'm a-vastin my own time. So I'll be off now and come back in twenty minutes or so for the things."

Soper accordingly retired—locking and bolting the door carefully after him. For, with all his apparent familiarity and good feeling towards the Magsman and with all the characteristic avarice of an official he was incorruptible in this capacity; and no money which Joe Warren or his friends had it in their power to offer, would have induced him to wink or connive at an escape. Indeed, during the short time he had remained in the cell, his eyes had travelled rapidly, but keenly and searchingly, over every link

in the Magsman's chains; and had he caught the faintest glimpse of anything calculated to excite his suspicions, he would have immediately summoned an assistant who had accompanied him as far as the entrance of the passage, and the most rigid investigation would have been the result.

However, his penetration and shrewdness were baffled for once; and the Magsman chuckled inwardly as he sate down to the enjoyment of the roast fowl, the sausages, the mashed potatoes, and the porter, which an eating-house in the Old Bailey had supplied. We should however observe that the fowl and sausages had been previously cut up into pieces, the potatoes turned over with a spoon, and even the very beer poured from one pot into another, by the busy hands of Mr. Soper, to assure himself that no file nor watch-spring was secreted amongst the articles intended for the prisoner's dinner.

The Magsman understood the meaning of all this, and knew that a strict watch was kept upon him: but he was very far from despairing of his escape; and as he devoured his food with a ravenous appetite, he said to himself, "To-morrow I shall not dine in Newgate."

At the expiration of about twenty minutes, Soper returned to take away the dishes and pewter-pot, all of which Joe Warren had cleared; and when the door again closed upon him and he was once more alone, he knew that he had four hours and a half to work in before he should experience another interruption.

And with such hearty good will did the Magsman ply the irresistible file, that by the time St. Sepulchre's Church struck six in the evening, two thirds of the labour was accomplished in respect to the massive chains with which he was laden. The booming of the bell, as it proclaimed that hour, was the signal for him to desist again; and, having concealed the file and filled up the severed portion of the links with the black putty, he lay down on the iron bedstead and affected to have been sleeping when Mr. Soper re-appeared with his supper and a candle.

A few remarks were interchanged; and the Magsman was left to the enjoyment of his meal. In twenty minutes Soper returned to fetch the plate and pewter-pot; and Warren had then two hours wherein to continue his operations until the official should make his last round for the night.

During these two hours the Magsman filed almost completely through each of the four links which it was necessary to sever in order to enable himself to throw off his chains at the proper time; and he had scarcely filled up the places with the remains of his blackened putty, when Soper entered the cell. The man examined the shackles all over, and appeared quite satisfied that they had not been tampered with. He then wished the Magsman good night, and took his departure, double-locking the door, and securely fastening all the bolts.

The candle, having been sent in from the coffee-house which supplied the Magsman's meals, was not taken away from him: for, in the times of which we are writing, untried prisoners were permitted the use of lights until a late hour,—and Mr. Soper saw by the length of the candle that it would not burn much beyond eleven o'clock.

The Magsman resolved to wait until the church of St. Sepulchre should have struck nine, ere he commenced the grand operations which he hoped would result in his escape. There was the possibility, though certainly not the probability, that Soper might take it into his head to pay him another visit that evening: but he felt confident that if the official came at all, it would be at nine o'clock.

Slowly—slowly passed that hour, during which the Magsman weighed, with some anxiety, all the chances for and against his escape. At one moment he dreaded lest Soper suspected his intentions: at another he feared that his friends might fail in accomplishing *their* portion of the work in the picture-dealer's house. Then his blood ran cold in his veins as the idea struck him that the implements which he possessed and the short time that he could command were totally inadequate for the immensity of the task that must be accomplished: and even when he reasoned himself into confidence on these heads, another source of alarm presented itself. What if some prisoner had been placed, during the day, in the cell overhead—or in the cell higher up still?

"No—it isn't likely," thought the Magsman to himself. "No one has been condemned to death *yet* during this session: and if there was, the ground-floor cells would be filled first."

Again did the voice of his own fears suggest, in whispering tones, that desperate characters like himself, might have been incarcerated during the last few hours in the cells above.

"Well—and if so," was his self-solacing argument, "any fellow that I might fall against in such a position would be only too glad to seize the opportunity of escaping along with me."

Scarcely had he arrived at this conclusion, when the clock struck nine;—and no intrusive step approached the door of his cell.

He waited ten minutes longer; — and still all was quiet, save the rumbling of the carts and hackney-coaches in Newgate Street.

"Now for it!" exclaimed the Magsman to himself; and, with a comparatively slight effort, he broke off his chains.

A weight seemed to be lifted from his heart in a moment: it bounded with an elasticity which scattered all remaining doubts and fears to the winds. He felt as if half of his freedom were already accomplished, and that it only depended on himself to consummate the rest. Had he imbibed a tumbler full of brandy, the effects could not have been more exhilarating.

Without losing a moment unnecessarily, Joe Warren screwed the three pieces of the jemmy together. He then drew the iron bedstead as noiselessly as possible into the middle of the cell, and lifted it up on one end. By means of the chair he mounted on the head-board, which was uppermost; and now, through the deep loop-hole of his dungeon, he could see the lights in the houses on the opposite side of Newgate Street. Yes—and he beheld the people passing in both directions; and the forms of the drivers seated outside their vehicles were borne rapidly by. Life and bustle were without; solitude and death within:—and he must escape—oh! he must escape—from the gloom and the danger of the latter, to join once more the companionship and the pleasures of the former!

We have already stated that the cell had a vaulted roof: and consequently the centre thereof was the thinnest part. Mounted on the upraised bedstead, the Magsman attacked with his crow-bar the solid

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masonry over-head—loosening the mortar as well as he was able round the key-stone of the arched ceiling. The task was by no means easy: for the mortar had hardened into the callosity of the granite-blocks which it held together—the position in which Warren was forced to labour was an awkward one—and the dust of the disturbed lime fell into his eyes.

Nevertheless he toiled courageously on in spite of these disadvantages; and in half-an-hour a large stone next to the central one was dislodged. The first breach having been made, materially facilitated the ensuing operations: the key-stone itself was soon removed—and by ten o'clock a considerable excavation was formed in the middle of the ceiling, so that the Magsman could feel with his hand the lower side of a flagstone in the pavement of the ceil overhead.

To raise this flag was no easy matter. It was necessary to clear away all the masonry adhering to those parts where it joined the circumjacent stones, from which it had to be separated by the jemmy. But at length this labour was accomplished; and the Magsman, to his infinite joy, found the flag yield to his vigorous upward pressure.

He moved it away from the mouth of the aperture which he had thus formed; and, without any difficulty, the adventurous Magsman passed through that opening into the cell immediately above his own. He dared not take the candle with him—for if any official of the prison should happen to be passing along Newgate Street and observe a light streaming from the loop-hole of a room which he knew to be occupied at the time, a suspicion that something wrong was going on would instantly be followed by a search—the result of which must, as a matter of course, prove fatal to the Magsman s enterprise.

In the dark, therefore, did he hastily grope about the cell into which he had thus worked his way;—and, to his joy, he discovered that it contained an iron bedstead similar to the one which had served him as a scaffolding below. Tilting it up lengthways,

and mounting on the head-board, as in the former instance, the Magsman renewed his operations by a determined attack on the ceiling of this cell on the first floor.

If his progress were not so rapid as hitherto, and if the necessity of working in the dark materially impeded his operations, nevertheless he found some recompense in the fact that the roof he was now assailing was not near so thick as the one through which he had already passed. Nevertheless, the toil was arduous in the extreme: the dust, getting into his throat, created a burning thirst; and he was several times forced to descend and drink from the large pitcher of water in his own cell. But every piece of mortar which he broke away and every stone which he removed, appeared in his eyes to be another and another obstacle overcome; and, so far from despairing, his hopes acquired strength as time progressed.

Midnight sounded from St. Sepulchre's just as the Magsman succeeded in raising a large flag which covered the excavation he had formed in the vaulted roof of this dungeon on the first floor; and in a few minutes he passed up into the cell overhead. Around the walls, in the total darkness, did he sweep his hands: but, alas! this time he was disappointed—for the place was entirely empty—and there was no iron bedstead to form a scaffolding.

This contingency had however been provided for, as the reader will soon find.

Descending into the room beneath, the Magsman thrust the blanket and cover-lid (*alias* horse-cloth) belonging to the bed, up into the top cell; and mounting thither once more, he resumed his operations with fresh energy, though working in utter darkness.

Using the trusty crow-bar as a hammer, he drove two of the four nails which had been sent him, into one of the walls, at a distance of five feet from the floor, and about a foot apart from each other. The remaining two he drove into the opposite wall, preserving as nearly as he could guess the same relative position. He then unwound his ball of silken cord, and fastened it from nail to nail, in such a manner that two parallel lines, with an interval of twelve inches, extended from wall to wall; and as the length of the string allowed these lines to be doubled, they were competent to bear a very considerable weight.

The Magsman now folded the blanket and horse-cloth into a sort of square cushion, which he placed upon the lines; and, having without much difficulty seated himself thereon, he was fairly balanced at a height of five feet from the floor, and at a convenient distance from the ceiling which he now attacked with his crow-bar.

One o'clock struck before the intrepid Joe Warren succeeded in moving the first stone. Well nigh exhausted with the extraordinary exertions he had already made—so parched with thirst that his tongue seemed like a piece of charcoal—and finding his tight-rope scaffold, ingenious though the contrivance might be, most inconvenient for his operations, the nearer he drew to the threshold of liberty, the greater became the difficulties which he had to encounter.

But still he did his best; and he worked cheerily, cheerily on;—nor would he waste time by descending into the cell on the ground-floor to slake his burning thirst with the water that was there.

Every now and then he paused for a few moments to listen—and when some suspicious noise met his ears, the Magsman grasped his crow-bar all the more tightly, and ground his teeth together,—for he was animated with the ferocious resolve to murder the first person who might appear to molest him. But on each occasion his apprehensions proved groundless—and he resumed his toils with a resuscitated energy.

All on a sudden the silken cords snapped in twain—and Joe Warren fell heavily upon the stone pavement.

He was sorely bruised; and for an instant he imagined that one of his legs was broken;—but, rising slowly and painfully, he shook himself like a lion that has just escaped from the pursuit of hunters—and a savage growl burst from his breast.

What was he to do? To mend the lines so as to enable them to bear his weight again, was impossible. A thought struck him!—he would descend to the cell beneath and pull the iron bedstead to pieces in order to form a scaffold for the continuation of his labours.

Rolling up the blanket and horse-cloth, and fastening them together so as to constitute a rope, he tied one end round the huge flag-stone which he had displaced from the floor of the uppermost cell, and passed the rope through the hole into the dungeon beneath: because, when once the iron bedstead should have been broken up, he would lose that means of ascent into the top dungeon again.

Descending into the cell on the first storey, he lowered the bedstead to its proper horizontal position, and tried the screws which held the various pieces together. But he was enveloped in darkness—the candle in his own cell had been extinguised for the last two hours—and he could not possibly pursue his present operations in such dense obscurity. Gnashing his teeth with rage, and giving vent to horrible imprecations in an under tone, the Magsman again and again tried the screws with his crow-bar: but they were so completely rusted into their sockets, that half-an-hour was thus passed without producing the slightest effect upon any one of them.

What was he to do? Again he asked himself this question; and, sitting down exhausted on the bed which he had fruitlessly endeavoured to break up, he wiped the perspiration and the dust from his throbbing brows.

The Magsman was perfectly ferocious: he chafed like a starved lion in a cage—he would have ruthlessly murdered any turnkey or prison official who might have appeared at that moment.

Yet something must be done! Time was passing: the hour was already gone by at which his friends expected that he would have succeeded in working his way through the masonry of the top cell so that only a thin sheet of lead should lie between him and liberty!

What if he were to tear the sacking of the straw-mattress into slips, and fasten them to the four nails in the place of the broken cord of silk? Yes—this was the only course which he could now adopt. Had there been a sacking, lashed with ropes in the usual way, to the bed, all this trouble and anxiety were spared him: but, alas! the foundation of that bedstead was a thin sheet of iron, supported by cross bars of the same metal, and on which the mattress lay.

No time was to be lost! With his powerful hands he tore open that mattress—turned out the straw—and rent the coarse stuff into several long slips. These he twisted up and fastened together; and, as-

cending once more to the top cell, he fixed his new tight-rope apparatus. It answered the purpose even far better than he had expected;—and, with reviving spirits, to work the Magsman went again.

The clock struck two as he thus resumed his toils; and he muttered to himself, "If nothing more happens to hinder me, I shall be safe away before that bell speaks again."

Tremendous were the exertions which the Magsman now made to accomplish his purpose: the masonry fell about him in large pieces—the dust involved him in a dense and palpable cloud, floating amidst the darkness—and the perspiration streamed down his face as if water had been poured over his head.

At length, immediately after the fall of a stone which had resisted his efforts for several minutes, his crow-bar struck against the lead which covered the flat roof of the gaol!

Then he paused, and listened with the deepest suspense.

From this cruel and almost agonising uncertainty he was speedily released: for three low but perfectly audible knocks upon the lead, convinced him that his friends were *there!*

Again he renewed his toils;—and every moment the hollow in the ceiling grew larger and larger.

Presently the lead was lifted from over the excavation—the fresh breeze blew upon his burning features—and as he looked up, he saw a countenance bending down over the hole thus formed.

"All right, Mr. Warren—there's nothing to apprehend!" were the reassuring words that met his ears, and which were uttered in the well-known voice of the Kinchin-Grand.

A few minutes' more labour sufficed to widen the aperture sufficiently to enable the strong arms of the Kinchin-Grand and two powerful men who were also with him, to drag Joe Warren up through the hole;—and he now stood upon the leads of Newgate!

A rope, which had been fastened to the chimney of Mr. Shrubsole's house, enabled the escaped felon and his three friends to gain the roof of that dwelling, into which they entered by means of a garret window.

"Now you can refresh yourself with a drop of somethink short," said the Kinchin-Grand.

The Magsman instinctively thrust out his hand in the dark, and grasped the case-bottle which his faithful and considerate friend thus tendered him. Long and deep was Joe Warren's draught; and never, never in all his life had the ardent alcohol seemed so welcome, so good, and so invigorating.

"You have this night done a thing that'll immortalise you," said the Kinchin-Grand, inspired with a sentiment of profound admiration for the daring feat which the Magsman had so triumphantly achieved and which had thus enabled him to escape from the strongest prison in all England.

"Well, I don't think it was a bad night's work, young fellow," returned the Magsman. "But who are your two friends, that I may thank them for the service they have done in helping you in this matter?—for it was too dark on the leads to catch a glimpse of their features—and here it's darker still."

"I suppose that the names of Dick the Tramper and Miles the Buzgloak ain't unbeknown to you, Mr. Warren?" said the Kinchin-Grand, with a chuckling laugh.

"I should rather think not?" exclaimed the Magsman, evidently delighted to be in such good company. "Tip us your mawley, Dick my boy—now, Miles, give us your hand—and thank you both kindly for this night's assistance."

"It was easy work so far as we was concerned, after all," observed the Tramper, who spoke in a thick, husky tone, which was natural to him.

"And had it been ten times as difficult, we'd have done it for you, old feller," added Miles the Buzgloak.

"Lord bless ye! what a lark it was," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, having drained the flask which he had passed round. "Fust, when we double-knocked at the door, crack went a pitch-plaster over the mouth of the old woman as opened it—and she was pinioned in a jiffey. Then we stayed as still as death—and up comed a tall genelman, whom we sarved just the same. Then comed the boy—and smack goes the Burgundy plaster again. Last of all old Shrubsole makes his appearance ——"

"Well, we musn't stay chattering here," interrupted the Magsman, somewhat impatiently. "Where's Lizzy Marks?"

"Keeping guard on the people of the house down in the kitchen," replied the precocious captain of the Kinchin-Prigs. "We carried 'em all down there, and took off the pitch-plasters from the three as had 'em dabbed on their faces; and your missus is a-keepin' them quiet with loaded pistols. But come along down stairs—and we'll call her up."

The villains accordingly descended the several flights leading to the passage communicating with the front door; and the Kinchin-Grand hurried down into the lower regions to communicate to the Gallows' Widow the welcome intelligence of her flash man's safety. But she had already heard the sounds of the heavy footsteps on the stairs; and rushing from the kitchen, she hastily gave the pistols to the Kinchin-Grand whom she met on her way, and a moment afterwards was hugging the Magsman with the most unfeigned sincerity.

When this transport of feeling was over—a feeling which even that criminal and degraded woman could experience as well as the Duchess clothed in silks and satins,—the Gallows' Widow recovered all her wonted calmness and self-possession.

"You must go out alone first—we'll follow in an hour," she said. "Yes—you must have a full hour," she continued, in a low and rapid whisper, "before we leave this house or allow the people in it a chance of freeing themselves from the cords that bind them. Here—I have provided you a large slouched hat—a cloak—and a thick shawl-handkerchief to tie round your neck."

And as she thus spoke, the woman took the various articles enumerated from a bag which in the meantime had been lying on the floor in the passage.

The Magsman speedily put on the disguise so considerately provided; then having taken leave of Dick the Tramper and Miles the Buzgloak, and having whispered two or three words in the ears of the Gallows' Widow, he issued from the house.

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CHAPTER LV.

THE MILLINER AND THE PRINCE.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of the day which followed the memorable night of Joe Warren's escape from Newgate; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her comfortable parlour, when Harriet entered to announce *Mr. Harley*.

The Prince of Wales advanced into the room, the door of which was immediately closed behind him; and the milliner rose to welcome his Royal Highness with her sweetest smiles.

"My dear friend," he said, kissing her buxom cheeks—for she was looking most invitingly handsome,—"you must really have fancied that I had forgotten you. I have not seen you since that unfortunate Sunday evening—nearly three weeks ago—when we both of us experienced so cruel a shock——"

"And to speak candidly," interrupted Mrs. Brace, a blush mantling upon her countenance, "I was fearful that you were too much disgusted on that occasion ever to cross my threshold again."

"What! have you no better opinion of my friendship?" exclaimed the Prince, passing his arm round the milliner's waist and drawing her towards him: then, having again kissed her, he made her resume her seat; and placing himself near her, he observed, "It was an unfortunate affair, for which you were in no way to blame. Will you not believe me when I assure you it was very far from being on that account that I have not called for a fortnight and upwards? The truth is, I am worried to death with this marriage-scheme which my august father and his Ministers have got up for me, and which I dare say you have seen announced in the papers. Besides, my creditors are pressing me on all sides,—they dun—threaten me with exposure—leave insolent messages at Carlton House—write the most insulting letters to my private secretary——"

"Ah! my dear Prince, how I wish that I was wealthy enough to assist you!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"I know you possess the most generous heart, Fanny—and therefore you can feel for me," said his Royal Highness. "But as I was telling you, these sources of vexation have made me ill—and I have scarcely been out of doors since I saw you last. This explanation will convince you that no unfriendly motive kept me away. I have often thought of you—especially when I read in the paper that the miserable man Joseph Warren was in custody."

"Ah! then you recognised the identity of that prisoner—with—my——"

And the handsome milliner stopped, blushed deeply, and held down her head.

"Why should you make allusions that distress you, Fanny?" demanded the Prince. "Yes—I knew immediately that the Joseph Warren who was thus arrested, must be the same individual who—— But no matter: and I suppose that you are aware of the marvellous escape which he achieved last night?"

"I am not only aware of it," responded the milliner: "but I was forced—yes—absolutely forced to assist him in the enterprise," she added, in a low and mournful tone.

"You!" ejaculated the Prince, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes, indeed," she immediately replied. "You of course understand that I am completely in his power—and when a woman who is connected with him called upon me and represented how my services could be rendered available, I was compelled to submit to an imperious necessity. I should not tell you all this—but you are so intimately acquainted with my affairs and my position, that it were ridiculous to conceal anything from you."

"I should be sorry if you did, Fanny," said the Prince, assuming his kindest tone—but only because there was a certain matter in which he required the milliner's assistance: otherwise the selfishness of his disposition would have rendered him impatient of the turn which the conversation had taken. "Proceed—tell me all that has occurred, so far as you were concerned."

"I shall not detain your attention on that point many minutes," answered Mrs. Brace, who, on her side, was merely volunteering these explanations in order to ascertain how far the sympathies of the Prince would extend in her favour—for the lapse of long years had not completely annihilated the affection which she had once borne him. "You must know," she continued, "that I yesterday paid a visit to that frightful prison of Newgate. The object of this proceeding was to supply the wretched man with the means of escape. Had any of his known friends sought an interview with him, they would have been so closely watched as to render it impossible to slip even a file into his hand—much less a packet of some size: whereas I, being looked upon as a stranger whom curiosity had led to visit the gaol, found that opportunity with comparative ease. In the packet which I was thus enabled to convey to him, there was a plan of Newgate, drawn up by some of his confederates outside the walls who were evidently full well acquainted with the interior. This plan showed him how his own cell was situated—how many rooms there were above him—and how he must work through the ceiling of each in order to arrive at the leads. The newspapers have told you the rest."

"Yes—and the whole thing was most admirably managed, truly," observed the Prince. "The idea of his accomplices getting into the house adjoining the prison—overpowering and binding the inmates—then ascending to the roof, whence they alighted on the top of Newgate in order to cut away the lead,—all this, I say, was excellent and showed a spirit of combination and enterprise worthy of a better cause. But have you any idea of what has become of the villain?"

"None—and now let us cease to allude to him," said Mrs. Brace.

"Be it so, my dear Fanny," rejoined the Prince: "for I have many things to talk to you about. In the first place, have you seen Lord Florimel?—for you have not, I hope, forgotten the little scheme which we settled together the last time I was here, and the object of which was to cure him of his sickly sentimentalism."

"I saw him very recently," answered Mrs. Brace, a deep blush again mantling her countenance—but for a reason far different from that which had previously called it up.

"And you have succeeded?" said the Prince. "Ah! that tell-tale glow upon your plump cheeks, Fanny——"

"No—I did *not* succeed," interrupted the milliner. "I lavished all my arts and wiles upon the object in view—and at the moment when I was about to triumph and he to succumb, a most unexpected intrusion dissolved the spell which I had cast upon him—and he escaped me."

"And you have not seen him since?" inquired the Prince.

"No. But he shall not escape me thus," added the milliner. "I have a thousand stratagems as yet unexhausted, and which I know well how to adopt in such a case," she observed, a wanton smile playing upon her moist lips and showing her brilliant teeth.

"Would that you were kind and amiable enough to use one of them in my behalf!" exclaimed the Prince, fixing upon her a look full of meaning.

"Ah! you have seen another houri who has smitten you," said Mrs. Brace, the wantonness of her smile now changing into archness—both irresistibly fascinating!

"You have conjectured the truth, Fanny," was the reply; "and your aid is needed to catch the wary and haughty, but beauteous bird in an inextricable mesh."

"The affair is, then, a difficult one?" said Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"More difficult than any amour which I have ever yet undertaken," answered the Prince; "inasmuch as the new object of my fancy is no young and inexperienced girl to be subdued by means of sophistry, promises, pledges, vows, and protestations—no woman of the middle class whom it is comparatively easy to dazzle with the splendour of my rank—no lady of easy virtue who values the title of the Prince's mistress more than her own coronet."

"Then who, in heaven's name, can she be?" inquired Mrs. Brace.

"A lady of high rank and most unimpeachable virtue," returned his Royal Highness: "a lady who has never furnished scandal with the slightest ground to assail her fair fame, and who nevertheless lives on terms of a singular and unaccountable nature with her husband. This husband is handsome—rich—elegant in manners—accomplished—generous—and in every respect formed to render a young and beautiful wife happy. But rumour declares that they live apart, though under the same roof——"

"You allude to the Countess of Desborough!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, suddenly interrupting the description which the Prince was giving her.

"I do. But are you acquainted——"

"I have the honour of her ladyship's patronage," rejoined the milliner.

"By heaven! this is fortunate," ejaculated the Prince, his countenance expressing the liveliest joy. "Does the Countess ever visit your establishment?"

"Seldom—and even then she merely stops in her carriage at the door to issue some order," said Mrs. Brace. "I usually attend her ladyship at her own mansion in Berkeley Square. Indeed, it is singular enough that I am to wait upon her the day after to-morrow at eleven o'clock in the morning."

"Oh! if your fertile brain could only devise some means of bringing that haughty woman to my arms, I would never, never cease to think of you with gratitude—the deepest gratitude, Fanny," said the Prince;—and, as he thus spoke, he took Mrs. Brace's plump, warm, white hand and pressed it tenderly.

"First let me know upon what terms you are with her ladyship," remarked the milliner. "As a matter of course you are acquainted with her: but does she suspect that you admire her? I am half-inclined to believe that you have expressed your feelings already in that quarter; and, being too precipitate, you have experienced a rebuff. Else wherefore do you denominate her proud and haughty?"

"You have guessed rightly, my dear friend," said the Prince. "It was on the very day after that disagreeable Sunday evening to which we have already alluded, that I called at Desborough House in Berkeley Square—and I saw the Countess alone. Although I had known her for some years, yet never before had she struck me as being so ravishingly beautiful. She dazzled—bewildered—fascinated me; and, unable to restrain my feelings, I cast myself at her feet. For a moment she yielded her hand to me—and I could see the fires of excitement flash from her eyes and the warm blushes glow upon her cheeks. But suddenly recovering herself, she assumed all the hauteur which would have become her so much better had she adopted that proud attitude at once. I soothed her—and our conversation proceeded: on her part, it almost seemed to encourage me—and, worked up nearly to a pitch of frenzy, I caught her in my arms. Again she abandoned herself to me for a few moments—and again did her eyes sparkle, and her cheeks glow with wanton blushes. But all in an instant she sprang from my embrace—uttered some words of reproach—and, ringing the bell, ordered my carriage to be summoned to the door, the menial of course believing that I myself must have expressed a wish to depart. But ere I left her, I was foolish enough to murmur some threat in her ears—and since that day I have not beheld her."

"Can you not read the enigma of her ladyship's conduct?" asked Mrs. Brace. "The explanation may be summed up in a few words. She is a woman of strong passions and stubborn virtue: her deeply-seated principles triumphed over her consuming desires."

"Yes—it must be as you have represented my dear friend," said the Prince.

"And therefore it will be almost impossible to corrupt the Countess of Desborough," rejoined Mrs. Brace.

"What! have you no hope to give me—no stratagem to suggest—no scheme to propose?" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "Ah! is this your fertility in resources, Fanny?"

"I do not profess to work miracles," was the answer. "Give me the common clay and I will undertake to mould it into the shape required: but if you place granite in my hands, it will resist all attempts to model it to a particular purpose."

"True!" ejaculated the Prince. "And yet I am not disposed to abandon the enterprise on account of its difficulty. Look you here, Fanny," he continued, throwing a Bank-note upon the table: "there are five hundred pounds—poor as I am, I can spare that amount for such an object. Remember, I do not mean to insult you by attributing mercenary motives to the assistance which

von so often render me: but I know that you have heavy expenses to meet in various ways—and perhaps that amount will sharpen your wits in my behalf on the present occasion."

"Well—I suppose that I must see what I can do in the matter," said Mrs. Brace. "Leave me to devise some project to smooth your path to the envied bower of the fair lady. After all, she is not ice—but flesh and blood—aye, and the blood is warm, too, that flows in her veins. But have you forgotten your Octavia?—does she no longer engage your thoughts, even for a single moment?"

"I love and adore her with a lasting passion," exclaimed the Prince: "and I shall write to her in a day or two to request her to meet me here. She believes that I am out of town for the present. But my affection for that beauteous girl is quite of a different nature from that which inspires me with regard to the Countess of Desborough. You say that you will see her ladyship the day after to-morrow in the forenoon? Well—in the evening I shall do myself the pleasure of visiting you again. Meantime farewell, dear Fanny."

And having embraced the handsome milliner, his Royal Highness took his departure.

CHAPTER LVI.

TWO SPECIMENS OF THE "NEW LIGHTS."

At the same time that the preceding dialogue was taking place in Pall Mall, a scene of scarcely a less interesting character was in progress at Mr. Meagles' lodgings in Jermyn Street.

Shortly after eight o'clock on this particular evening, Lady Letitia Lade, habited in her Amazonian garb, arrived at her friend's abode, and was immediately conducted by the agile Wasp to the parlour where his master was discussing a cigar and a bottle of Madeira.

"My dearest Letitia," exclaimed Meagles, bounding from his chair to receive and welcome the huntress; "I am so delighted you are come. There is such a treat in store for you!"

"The canting parson, I'll be bound," said the Amazon, laying aside her hat and arranging her glossy hair, as it showered in a thousand luxuriant ringlets over her well-formed shoulders.

"Exactly so," cried Meagles. "But sit down—take a glass of Madeira—light your cigarette—and I shall just have time to tell you all about it before he comes."

The beautiful woman complied with the various invitations to which Meagles gave such rapid utterance; and, lolling back in the chair while she stretched out her symmetrical legs towards the fender, she gave him a look to intimate that she was all attention.

"By the bye," said Meagles, "you have heard of Joe Warren's marvellous escape?"

"The whole town is ringing with it," responded the Amazon. "He is a perfect rival of Jack Sheppard. But let us hear about the *New Light*," she added, laughing.

"So you shall," returned Meagles. "This morning, at about ten o'clock, I wanted to go into the City to pay some money to a person of whom I bought a horse yesterday, and my gig was at the door, when as I was going down stairs, I overtook my sanctimonious neighbour, Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby. '*A fine morning, reverend sir,*' I observed.—'*Yes; under the divine blessing,*' he observed; and then he turned round and stared at me very hard indeed. '*I presume,*' he continued, after a long silence and an equally protracted survey, '*that you are the flesh-pot of Egypt who dwelleth on the first floor of this tabernacle!*'—I acknowledged without hesitation that I was the flesh-pot alluded to; and although I had a great mind to knock him down for his impudence, I restrained myself because such a proceeding on my part would only have spoilt the fun that you and I had determined to have with him.—'*Alas! alas!*' he murmured, groaning heavily at the same time, and rolling his eyes in an awful fashion: '*is it possible that such a comely gentleman as you are can be a prey to all the sinful lusts of the flesh?*'—'*Really, sir,*' said I, '*I am at a loss to understand your meaning;*' and I was getting very savage.—'*Whose chariot of the Philistines is that at the door?*' he demanded suddenly, and without taking any notice of my observation.—'*It is my gig,*' I said; '*but as for its being a chariot or belonging to the Philistines, that is quite another part of the business.*'—'*Which way is the man of wrath going?*' inquired Mr. Sneaksby.—'*If you mean me, I am going into the City,*' was my answer.—'*I will accompany the ungodly one,*' said the reverend gentleman: '*he shall put me down at the gates of Salem, that the portals thereof may delight his eyes, and invite him some day to enter.*' And without any more ado, Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby clambered up into the gig, covered his legs with my spare cloak, and made himself as comfortable as possible. So away we drove; and all along the Strand and Fleet Street the reverend gentleman regaled me with a discourse on the vanity of every possible thing in this world that he could think of. At last, when we reached the commencement of Cheapside, he desired me to take him a little way up St. Martin's le Grand; and, in compliance with his wishes, I stopped at the door of a large chapel, on the front of which the word 'SALEM' was cut in large letters. Two sleek-looking men, dressed in black, and who were standing at the entrance with faces as demure as if they were mutes, came forward and assisted the holy man to alight; and Mr. Sneaksby, without uttering a word of thanks for the ride he had enjoyed, asked me if I would not '*tarry and hear the soul-refreshing discourse*' he was about to deliver. I expressed the regret I felt at my inability to accept his kind invitation; but I said that if he would honour me with his company for an hour in the evening, in my own apartments, I should be charmed to listen to his edifying and instructive conversation. He took it quite seriously—seemed to have formed a much better opinion of me than at first—and promised to look in at half-past eight o'clock. It is that now," added Tim, consulting his watch.

Scarcely had these last words fallen from the lips of Meagles, when slow and measured steps were heard descending the stairs, as if a funeral procession were coming down.

"This is the parson," whispered Meagles, chuckling in anticipation of glorious fun.

"But he is bringing somebody with him," observed the Amazon, in a similarly subdued tone.

"The more the merrier, if they're all like himself," responded Meagles. "Hush!"

Three measured and solemn knocks were given at the room-door, as if a ghost were about to enter.

"Come in!" exclaimed Meagles, instantly putting on a demure aspect—a proceeding in which he was imitated by the beautiful huntress, at least so far as she could induce her lovely, laughing, joyous features to assume a serious expression.

The door was thrown wide open—and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby entered the apartment with slow and sanctimonious face, followed by one of the sleek-looking men whom Tim Meagles had seen at the door of Salem Chapel.

But while these two pious individuals are settling themselves in the chairs which Meagles hastens to place near the table for their accommodation, we will just say a word respecting their external appearance.

The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby was a man of about five-and-forty years of age. The crown of his head was bald: but dark frizzy hair stood out in a bunch, on each side, between the temple and the ear. Behind it was cut very short indeed, and lay quite flat and straight. His countenance was thin, pale, and somewhat of the hatchet description: but it would not have been disagreeable were it not for the settled expression of sanctimonious gloom and melancholy demureness which it wore. For *cant* was written in every lineament and on every feature as plainly as the word may be read on this page: *cant* was seen in the rolling of the eyes—the gradual elevation and depression of the brows—the pursing-up of the lips—the elongation of the chin—the slow and studied movements of the head. Yes—and *cant*, too, was recognised in the low white cravat that encircled the long, scraggy neck—the large shirt-frill—the clerical cut of the black coat and waistcoat with stand-up collars—and the knee breeches, bluish-black cotton stockings, and the great shoes with silver buckles. In person Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby was tall, thin, and slightly inclined to a stoop; and were it not for the measured pace at which he was accustomed to walk, his gait would have been shambling and awkward to a degree.

The individual who accompanied him, was dressed in precisely the same manner: but in person he was very different. Short, thick-set, stout, and with a large, round, rubicund countenance, he presented a somewhat sleek, oily, and comfortable appearance in comparison with his friend—save that the habitual assumption of a demure expression of features would have led a stranger to believe that a naturally jovial and contented disposition had been marred and rendered wretched by some sudden affliction which had lingered ever since in the shape of a deeply-seated and unappeasable woe. In a word, he looked like a jolly landlord fond of good ale, who having drunk himself into insolvency was compelled to adopt the profession of undertaker's mute and moisten his food with nothing better than water. Not that such was really the case in the present instance: but such, we say, was the impression his aspect would have made upon the mind of any one who saw him for the first time.

Scarcely had Mr. Sneaksby and his friend taken their seats, when their looks fell simultaneously upon Lady Lade, who was surveying them from the corner of her laughing eyes, and gently puffing the cigarette with the lips which could not altogether suppress a smile.

The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby seemed petrified with sudden astonishment—and his friend appeared precisely in the same predicament. For upwards of a minute did they gaze, open-mouthed, upon the lovely creature lounging with graceful negligence in her chair. At the first glance they fancied it was a young and dandified man with his hair dressed in a feminine style: but as their looks wandered over the beautiful white forehead with its transparent tracery of azure veins faintly marked—the profile too delicate for the male sex—the brightness of the rich moist coral lips—the total absence of beard and whisker—the fairness of the complexion—and the glossy silkiness of that raven hair,—as their eyes, we say, embraced all these fascinating details one after another, they began to entertain sore misgivings;—and when their looks settled upon the exuberant and swelling contours of the full bosom over which the riding-surtout fitted with such shapely tightness, developing rather than concealing those feminine charms of which the Amazon possessed such a voluptuous abundance, their faces gradually elongated to a degree presenting the most ludicrous aspect of woe-begone sanctimoniousness and hypocritical misery.

"Nathaniel Sneaksby," said the short gentleman, at length recovering the power of speech, and raising his eyes and lifting his hands as if he were going off in a fit, "know ye aught of that carnal creature?"

"Verily, my dearly-beloved Ichabod Paxwax, she seemeth to me like the woman of Babylon," responded the reverend gentleman, imitating his friend in respect to the elevation of the eyes and hands.

Thereupon both Tim Meagles and the huntress burst into a hearty laugh: for, so far from being offended at the observations just made, they had expected something of the kind and were highly amused at what they did hear.

"Brother Sneaksby, let us depart hence," said the gentleman whose name appeared to be Ichabod Paxwax; "for I fear that we have fallen in with the ungodly."

"It is precisely for that reason we must stay and do our holy behest," returned the reverend minister. "Peradventure we may be enabled, by our savoury discourse, to render that lost one sensible of her evil ways: for she is comely to look upon, and it were a sorrow and a shame to abandon her to the vanities by which she is encompassed round about."

"We will stay, then," said Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, with whom Mr. Sneaksby's will was evidently law.

"Now, gentlemen," exclaimed Meagles, "if you are really desirous that your presence should work salutary effects with regard to myself and my fair companion, you will accept such humble hospitality as I can offer you. There's Port, Sherry, and Madeira upon the table—and at ten o'clock there's roast turkey, chine, mashed potatoes, and so on."

"Flesh-pots!" exclaimed the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, shaking his head solemnly, but unable to prevent his lips from smacking slightly—for his nose had caught the rich odour which came up from the kitchen as he was ere now descending the stairs.

"Vanities!" murmured Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, his own lips watering amazingly and a hungry sensation coming over him.

"Yet, verily, for the stomach's sake must we do this," continued Mr. Sneaksby, filling a glass with Madeira.

"Yea, even so," added Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, pouring himself out a bumper of Port.

"Your names, gentlemen," said Meagles, "we know already. But you are not yet acquainted with my fair companion, whose fancy it is on occasions to wear a riding-dress. Allow me to introduce you to Lady Letitia Lade, wife of Sir John Lade, one of the richest baronets in England."

The announcement of the Amazon's rank and wealthy alliance produced a sudden and startling effect upon the two pious gentlemen. They each made a terrible grimace and looked awfully confused as the coarse allusions in which they had indulged flashed to their minds; and then they exchanged glances which said, as eloquently as ever eyes yet spoke—"Brother Sneaksby, what a fool you made of yourself!"—"Brother Paxwax, what an ass you are!"

Thus is it ever with religious hypocrites. They will heap their cowardly abuse and aim their malignant shafts at a plain Mrs. Smith or a simple Mrs. Jones whom they behold or suspect to be in an equivocal situation: but let the offending woman prove to be a lady of title and fortune, and the canting humbugs close their eyes at once to all her faults.

"Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen," the Amazon observed, after enjoying their confusion for nearly a minute, during which they fidgetted upon their chairs, exchanged glances ludicrously doleful, and threw furtive looks upon the lady whom they feared to have mortally offended. "I am not at all vexed at the little remarks which you thought fit to make: I am sure you were only acting conscientiously. Come, I will drink success to Salem!"

"Success to Salem!" ejaculated Meagles, filling his glass.

"Of a surety I see no harm in drinking a pious toast," observed Mr. Sneaksby, to whom Mr. Paxwax had cast a look of anxious inquiry.

"Be it so," murmured the latter gentleman; and the glasses were all drained in a moment.

"I now propose the health of our respected and esteemed friend, the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby," said Meagles; "and in order to do justice to the same, I further propose that we drink it in tumblers and not in paltry wine glasses."

"I cordially agree," said the Amazon.

"Amen," murmured Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, having received a sign of approval from his spiritual chief: whereupon he filled a tumbler to the brim with the fruity old Port.

Meagles, the Amazon, and Mr. Paxwax, then imbibed their deep draughts to the honour of Mr. Sneaksby, who sate bolt upright in his chair endeavouring to screw his countenance into a complacent smile. When the ceremony was over, the reverend gentleman filled *his* tumbler almost to overflowing; and rising in a slow and solemn manner, he delivered the following address with that peculiar nasal twang and chaunting tone which had become habitual to him:—

"Christian friends, my heart boundeth like a young roe on the hill-tops at the honour ye have done me. For, alas! I am not ignorant of my own unworthiness, and how sinful a vessel I am. But, obedient to that call which so mysteriously prompted me to found the sect of *New Lights*, each member paying threepence a week to the General Fund, a penny a week for Salem, and as much more as he chooses to give,—obedient to that call, I say, I have come before the world as the originator of a system which is calculated to reconcile all conflicting opinions by proclaiming unceasing hostility to those who refuse to join us. For we are a sect militant, and can tolerate no doctrines or sentiments save the ones which we profess. On this broad basis is our institution established; and most savoury and soul-refreshing is the consciousness of aiding in so good a work. Alas! long was I a miserable, miserable sinner! For years was I a wicked linen-draper, having no thought but to make gains largely and expend them freely. My table groaned beneath the weight of luxuries—I was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. Never did my footsteps cross the threshold of church, chapel, or place of worship; and my vices, debaucheries, and immoralities were numerous as the hairs on my head. But, alas! vengeance came in the shape of one of those unclean swine whom men call sheriff's-officers; and my goods were all swept away—yea, vessels of gold and vessels of silver, and all the flesh-pots wherein I did vainly rejoice, were borne off to the auction-rooms and vended to the ungodly. Then for many weary months I sate me down in a debtors' gaol; and no friends came to see me in the gate. Naked and in want, I was turned forth upon the wide world; and, not having a human being to extend a helping hand towards me nor a morsel to put between my lips, I reflected in the bitterness of my spirit on the course which I ought to pursue. Then was it that a light dawned in upon my soul—I saw the error of my ways—I obeyed the call which at that moment I received—I set up my staff in an open place and addressed the multitude—and on that day the sect of *New Lights* sprang into existence. Such, dear Christian friends, is the outline of my career. My beloved brother in the good work, the esteemed and revered Ichabod Paxwax, who sitteth amongst us even now, was one of my earliest adherents. His life hath been chequered likewise: but our eyes are open to the vanities of this world, and we are faithfully performing the mission for which we were destined and to perfect us for which we were so sorely chastened. Oh! my Christian brother Meagles—oh! my Christian sister Letitia Lade—arise—gird up your loins—repent—heap ashes upon your head—clothe yourselves in sack-cloth—put gold and silver into your pockets and come to Salem—and ye shall be numbered amongst us—yea, even amongst the elect!"

As Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby uttered these last words, with awful contortions of the countenance, rolling of the eyes, and upraising of the arms, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax thought it only decent and becoming on his part to get up a little bye-play in the form of a gentle whimpering;—while Tim Meagles and the Amazon experienced the utmost difficulty to restrain themselves from bursting into violent peals of laughter.

The reverend gentleman, having brought his discourse to a conclusion, drained his tumbler and sate down, evidently well satisfied with the eloquence he had displayed and the impression he fancied that he had made.

"In the name of her ladyship and on my own account," observed Meagles, assuming a very solemn demeanour, "I can only say that we shall certainly visit Salem next Sunday, and that we shall con-

tribute our mite to so good a cause as that which you have propounded to us. For the present we can do nothing better than drink, in brimming tumblers, the health of our other new and esteemed friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax."

The face of the little gentleman, which had already acquired an additional rubicundity from the wine he had drunk, now became absolutely purple through excitement; and the toast having been duly honoured, he responded to the same in the following terms:—

"Dear brother Sneaksby and Christian friends, I thank you kindly. I'm a man of few words, but very capacious thoughts. My reverend leader in the good cause has given you a sketch of his life. I'll give you mine. Inscrutable decrees made me adopt the cheesemongering and bacon line. Like brother Sneaksby, I made money rapidly — but spent it faster still. I mean I got into debt. My extravagance was wonderful; and I am not ashamed now, because I glory in the present when compared with the past,—I am not ashamed now, I say, to confess that for a matter of twelve years I went to bed drunk every night of my life. Liquor was as necessary to me as victuals—or more so. Well, this couldn't last —and it didn't. The Philistines put executions into my house—the Ammonites took me to gaol. I was like Lazarus—but even worse; for I had no rich man's crumbs to eat. Like brother Sneaksby again, I was turned adrift naked and in want. As I passed the tavern and ale-houses, I would have given my soul for a draught of strong beer: I was sick unto death for a pint of ale. But I could obtain none. Being sore athirst, I entered the famous inn where I was wont to expend my gold: I craved credit for some drink—but the waiter thrust me forth into the street. I anathematised him in the bitterness of my spirit; and I denounced the tavern as a whitened sepulchre. Thus was my soul relieved of a part of the load that lay upon it. But still the thirst was torturing me; and I was fain to seek the

pump to refresh my burning tongue. Then, as I drank the cold water which my stomach loathed, I felt like brother Sneaksby again—that I had a call. I heard of the *New Lights*—I repaired to Salem—and this revered gentleman at once took me to his home, and set steaks and bottled porter before me. Then I knew that a blessing attended upon the sect which he had founded; and I unhesitatingly joined it. Oh! my dear Mr. Meagles—my Christian sister, Lady Letitia Lade—with these striking examples before your eyes, can you hesitate to come amongst us? Most welcome will ye be—chosen vessels will ye prove—and the gold and silver which ye have promised to give unto Salem will help to redeem other lost creatures, even as such a miserable sinner as Ichabod Paxwax has been brought to redemption!"

With this eloquent and touching peroration, the pious gentleman drained his tumbler and sate down.

Meagles made a suitable response, and ended by proposing the health of Lady Lade Again were the tumblers filled and emptied; and then the Amazon, having returned thanks, insisted that a similar compliment should be paid to her friend Meagles. The more they drank, the less hesitation did the pious gentlemen exhibit in drinking deeper draughts;—and what with the toasts already enumerated, and others subsequently proposed and honoured, both Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax were in a very comfortable condition indeed by the time Mrs. Piggleberry and Wasp served up the promised banquet.

The landlady seemed highly delighted to find her second-floor lodger on such excellent terms with the occupant of her first storey; and Wasp appeared literally bursting with the mischievous propensities to which he did not however dare give vent in the presence of his master. One little freak he *did* perform all the same; and this was to tread with all his weight and force upon Mr. Ichabod Paxwax's toes—an incident for which he apologized with an appearance of the utmost sincerity, and which made that pious gentleman wriggle and twist for some moments in excruciating torture.

At length the turkey, the chine, and the mashed potatoes, flanked by foaming tankards of brown stout and sparkling ale, were duly spread upon the hospitable board; and Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby contrived to place himself close to the Amazon, on whose charms his eyes had been dwelling for the previous half-hour with a gloating earnestness that was only subdued by the vacancy of inebriety.

"Won't you ask a blessing, brother Sneaksby?" said Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, his eyes watering with the pain so recently inflicted upon his corn, and his mouth watering likewise, but at the odour of the turkey.

"Hic—aye—verily, I was ob—liv—livious," responded the reverend gentleman; and, joining his hands, he muttered something which was so interspersed with "hics" that it was perfectly unintelligible.

Mr. Paxwax, however, seemed satisfied; and moaned forth a guttural "Amen" at the conclusion.

Tim Meagles now carved the turkey: and the pious gentlemen did honour to the repast. Nor did they spare the brown stout, of which they seemed particularly fond; and the heavy malt liquor, mixing with the wine which they had taken in no niggard quantities, produced such an effect upon them that while the one saw two Sneaksbys and ten candles, the other beheld two Paxwaxes and a dozen lights.

Meagles and the Amazon exchanged significant glances from time to time, testifying to each other how intensely they enjoyed the evening's proceedings; and the mischievous pair kept filling the pious gentlemen's glasses the moment they were emptied.

"Brother Sneaksby," at length said the stout and red-faced saint, "I pre—he—hic—sume that we shall now—hic—wind—hic—up, with sing—ing—ing the —hic—dox—ox—ology."

"Hold your tongue, brother Paxwax — you're drunk!" exclaimed the reverend minister of Salem Chapel, who at that moment had begun to press his knee gently against the Amazon's.

"Drunk!—me drunk!" moaned the astounded Ichabod, falling back in his chair, and lifting his hands in horrified amazement. "Brother Sne—eaks —hicby—did you mean that for me?"

"To be sure I did—hic," responded the reverend gentleman, darting a savage glance on his friend. "Drunk—beastly drunk, I say. Verily, Ich—hic—abod, thou hast likened thyself unto filthy swine!"

For a few seconds Mr. Paxwax gazed on his leader with the vacant stare of stupid astonishment: then, all on a sudden giving vent to his feelings in a hollow moan, he fell flat upon the floor.

"Dead drunk!" exclaimed Meagles; and Wasp being summoned to assist, the inebriated *New Light* was borne up-stairs to his pious friend's chamber, where he was undressed and put to-bed in a most hopeless state of intoxication.

But scarcely had the door closed behind Meagles and Wasp, as they carried Mr. Ichabod Paxwax away between them, when the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, apparently regardless of his companion's fate, turned towards Lady Letitia Lade; and, assuming as tender an expression as the peculiar configuration of his countenance and his own obfuscated ideas would permit, he said, "Yea, verily, sweet woman, thou art comely to—hic—look upon. But doth not that tight fitting coat compress—ess thy form—hic—somewhat inconveniently?"

"Oh! not in the least, I can assure you," exclaimed the mischievous Amazon, allowing him to press his knee more closely still against her own, and bending upon him a look of encouragement.

"Of a surety I am surprised that thou art easy in such an attire," continued Mr. Sneaksby, leaning forward: "methought it must be tight and even painful *here*."

And, as he spoke, he passed his hand over the Amazon's bosom: then, flattering himself that as she only smiled gaily with her red lips and her wicked eyes, she was far from offended at his proceeding, he pressed the glowing orbs which were imprisoned in the well-fitting riding-coat.

But at the same moment the huntress raised her hand and dealt him such a smart and ringing box on the ears, that the pious gentleman was knocked clean off his chair and levelled as completely with the floor as his friend Ichabod had been, though from another cause, before him.

"Holloa! what's the matter?" exclaimed Meagles, returning to the room at the instant.

"Only the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby making love to me," responded the Amazon, almost suffocating with the hilarious laughter in which she now indulged.

Meagles comprehended what had passed; and

throwing himself on a seat, he gave way to an equally hearty burst of merriment.

Slowly and demurely did the minister of Salem Chapel rise from the carpet; and when he had gained his legs, his body swayed backward and forward for several moments before he could even steady himself by leaning on the back of his chair. First he gazed in a dull and vacant manner at Meagles—then his eyes settled in a similarly meaningless fashion upon Lady Letitia Lade;—and then he burst out into a horse-laugh as the best means of covering his confusion.

"Come—resume your seat, reverend sir," said the Amazon, with a good-humoured smile; "and we shall be very excellent friends so long as you don't attempt to make love to me. Remember," she added archly, "I am *a carnal creature—a woman of Babylon*—and you must not render me worse."

Mr. Sneaksby looked particularly foolish—the more so because he was particularly drunk: but, cheered by the good-natured manner in which Meagles now pressed him to wind up with a glass of whiskey-and-water, he accepted the invitation and poured the steaming punch down his throat as if it were anything rather than alcohol.

Presently an oath slipped from his tongue—then his conversation grew slightly loose and indecorous—and, having vociferated a bacchanalian song by way of concluding the evening's entertainment, he staggered off to bed, with the emphatic declaration that "he'd be damned if he wouldn't denounce that infernal drunken scoundrel Paxwax next Sunday, from the pulpit of Salem Chapel."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE OLD BAILEY.

At nine o'clock on the morning following the incidents just related, Martin and Ramsey were ushered by Soper into the dock of the criminal tribunal in the Old Bailey.

The weather was fine and frosty—and the sunbeams, illuminating the crisp fresh air, penetrated into the Court, as if by playing on the countenances of the accused they could diminish the ghastliness of their aspect.

The Grand Jury had already returned true bills of indictment against the prisoners: the petty jury had been sworn and were located in their box;—the Recorder was seated behind his little desk upon the bench, at one end of which a couple of Aldermen were lounging idly and conversing upon the grand entertainment given by the Lord Mayor on the previous day;—and the barristers were untying their bundles of briefs (sham ones in many instances) on the table around which they were placed.

The gallery and the body of the hall were crowded: for the circumstances connected with the case had produced a deep sensation—and many elegantly-dressed ladies were present to hear the proceedings.

The two persons chiefly interested in the trial that was about to ensue, were care-worn, woe-begone, and overwhelmed with confusion. The train of thoughts that swept through their minds as they took their stand in the fatal dock, recalled to their remembrance the happy days of innocence which were gone, never to be renewed; and, now that it was too late, bitterly—bitterly did they curse the folly—the insanity—the madness which had hurried them into those ways of crime whence there was no retreating!

The usher proclaimed silence in the Court—the witnesses were ordered to withdraw—and the prisoners were called upon to plead. To this demand Martin responded, "Not guilty," in a faint and scarcely audible tone: but Ramsey, summoning all his courage to his aid by a desperate effort, gave the same reply in a firmer and louder voice.

The counsel for the prosecution then rose and addressed the jury.

He began by explaining that there were two separate indictments against the prisoners at the bar. The first charged them with forging certain powers of attorney, and with passing spurious coin into the circulation of this realm: the second accused them of conspiring to kidnap, carry off, and keep in confinement Sir Richard Stamford, baronet. It was on the former indictment that they were now charged; and on the allegations set forth therein were they to take their trial. The learned counsel went on to state the case at considerable length: but as we shall detail the evidence adduced in support of the prosecution, it is unnecessary to give the opening speech.

Sir Richard Stamford was first summoned to the witness-box, which he entered with the air of a man determined to perform a painful duty: for, in the generosity of his heart, he even pitied the two wretches who had worked such deplorable and wholesale mischief against him. His appearance was the signal for a murmur of surprise and sympathy throughout the hall,—surprise at the great resemblance which he bore to the Prince of Wales—and sympathy on account of the misfortunes which he had endured.

Martin hung down his head through shame; and Ramsey, having darted one furtive glance at the man whom he had so deeply injured, never once looked again towards the witness-box during the hour and a half that it was occupied by the baronet.

Sir Richard Stamford, in answer to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, recited most of those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. He explained how he had first been induced to enter into partnership with the prisoners—the amounts he had invested in the bank—the trust he reposed in Martin and Ramsey—and the implicit belief which he put in their continual statements relative to the prosperity of the establishment. He went on to detail the circumstances which led him at last and all on a sudden to investigate the books—the shock which he experienced on discovering the firm to be in a state of bankruptcy—and the conversation which he had overheard between Ramsey and Martin at the tavern at Aylesbury. In the course of that conversation Martin explained to his accomplice in iniquity how his visit to London had been attended with complete success, *and how the forgeries had been so skilfully executed that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in selling out the stock at the Bank of England.* Sir Richard Stamford proceeded to observe that Martin and Ramsey, on the same occasion, congratulated each other on the good provision they had made for themselves; and

that they alluded to a certain Joseph Warren, nick-named the Magsman, with whom they had had previous dealings in respect to spurious coin. The baronet next explained the tragic scene which took place at the Manor, and which involved the suicidal attempt made by his wife—an act ultimately causing her death. He then related how he was kidnapped and conveyed to the dungeon in Thacker's Court—how he was required, as the price of his liberty, to sign some paper with the contents of which he was not made acquainted—how he refused to affix his signature thereto—and how he escaped in a few days by the assistance of a certain Mr. Page. Lastly, Sir Richard Stamford explained how he had sought and obtained an interview with his wife in her last moments—how he had pardoned her for all her sinfulness towards him—how she had confessed her guilt in the presence of a magistrate who attended at her death-bed on purpose to receive her statement—and how with her last breath she had proclaimed her husband's innocence of all the misdeeds imputed to him.

The Buckinghamshire justice of the peace who was present, as just described, at Lady Stamford's death, was the second witness examined. A paper was put into his hand; and he declared it to be the depositions which he had taken down from the dying woman's lips. The contents went far to confirm Martin and Ramsey's guilt in respect of the misappropriation of the funds of the bank, and likewise to prove her husband's innocence in that respect. With regard to the forgeries and the issue of spurious coin the document said little; as Lady Stamford had never been made acquainted with those facts by her paramour Ramsey: but the paper set forth that when Sir Richard accused Ramsey of those crimes, on the memorable night at the Manor, he did not attempt to deny them.

The next witness called was Mr. Peter Grumley, the police-officer. He deposed to the capture of the prisoners effected in the manner already known to the readers; and on being shown a certain paper, he declared that he had discovered it in a cupboard when searching the house in Thacker's Court. This paper set forth that Sir Richard Stamford conveyed all his property to Martin and Ramsey for the benefit of the creditors of the bank; that he acknowledged to have committed certain frauds and forgeries, which he implored them to settle in order to rescue his name from infamy; that on those conditions he would depart to America, with the express understanding that he was never to return to England; and that five hundred a-year were to be allowed him for the rest of his life by the aforesaid Martin and Ramsey. This paper, which was drawn up in the handwriting of Ramsey (as proved by another witness), was without date or signature, and was evidently the one which it was sought to coerce Sir Richard Stamford into signing when he was imprisoned in the dungeon.

Mr. Page was now summoned to the box, which he entered with a smirking self-sufficient air; and, having complacently surveyed both judge and jury, he proceeded to answer the questions put to him by the counsel for the prosecution. He explained that, being entrapped into the power of certain villains, he was incarcerated in the same dungeon with Sir Richard Stamford—that they escaped thence—and that accident had thrown into his hand a document which had already been adduced in evidence at the police-court. This was a letter addressed to *Joseph Warren, at the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown;* and it was likewise proved (in the course of the trial) to be in Ramsey's handwriting. We recapitulate its contents, as being a necessary link in the chain of evidence, although they are already known to the reader:—

"*March* 17*th*, 1794.

"The terms are accepted. A Bank-note for a hundred pounds is enclosed in this letter. You will acknowledge the receipt thereof, directing your reply, as heretofore, to Mr. M——, putting 'private' in the corner outside the letter. We will take three thousand in the first instance, and three thousand more this day six months. You will pack the *goods* up in a square deal box, the boards of which must be at least three-quarters of an inch thick; and the lid must be well nailed down. Book it per carrier; and print '*C. and Co.*' in the corner of the card of address. On receipt of the box, the other hundred pound note shall be duly forwarded."

The next witness examined on the present occasion was the cashier of the late banking establishment at Aylesbury. He proved the handwriting of the document found in the house at Thacker's Court, and that of the letter addressed to Joseph Warren: it was Mr. Ramsey's. The cashier went on to show that Sir Richard Stamford never interfered with the business, and never overdrew his own private account. He perfectly well recollected the arrival of a box containing gold, or alleged to contain gold, about the commencement of the Spring of the previous year (1794). The contents were three thousand guineas, or what he (the cashier) took to be guineas; and Mr. Martin himself mixed them up with several thousands of guineas previously in the safe. The whole was paid away in due course. He thought the box came from Coutts and Co., the London agents of the bank.

The next witness was a clerk in the Bank of England. This gentleman proved that extensive forgeries had been committed on that establishment: powers of attorney authorising the sale of stock invested in the names of several persons, had been acted upon by Mr. Martin who was in the habit of receiving the dividends for that stock. These powers of attorney were forgeries. Mr. Martin had attended at the Bank with a stock-broker to effect the sales and receive the proceeds.

Two or three witnesses were then called to prove that they had never signed their names to the powers of attorney just alluded to: nor had they in any way authorised the sale of the stock specified therein.

This closed the case for the prosecution; and a barrister, who had been retained for the purpose, entered upon the defence of the two prisoners. But, although a man of great talent, he could not grapple with the stubborn facts which had been adduced. The forgery, at all events, was completely made out: and the learned gentleman was compelled to do the best he could for his clients in the shape of sophistry, specious declamation, and impassioned appeal to the jury. At the conclusion of his speech, he called several witnesses to testify to the characters of the accused; and this course gave the prosecuting counsel the right of reply—a privilege which is detestable in the estimation of all humane men, but which in political cases serves the purposes of despotic Ministers and bloodthirsty Attorneys-General most admirably.

The Recorder summed up the evidence with firmness and impartiality. In fact judges are nearly always honest and dispassionate save in such instances as those to which we have alluded; and then, with but few exceptions, they are the rank and unblushing partizans of the Government.

It was five o'clock in the evening of this memorable day, when the jury retired to deliberate in their private room.

For upwards of half-an-hour they remained absent; —and during this interval the prisoners exhibited a nervous anxiety which, guilty though they assuredly were, was piteous to behold. Martin's countenance was ghastly pale; and, as he was advanced in years, the spectacle which he presented to the view was one that might well engender sympathy. Ramsey vainly endeavoured to appear firm; his quivering lip—the frequent spasmodic movements of his arms—the occasionally wild glaring of his eyes—the twitching of the flesh at the corners of his eyes—and the glances which he threw every other moment towards the door by which the jury had left their box,—all these were indications of a soul-crushing suspense and an appalling terror.

At length that door opened—and the jurymen returned into the Court. Slowly and solemnly—like men who were about to take part in a funeral ceremony—did they resume their seats. All eyes were fixed upon them—a pin might have been heard to drop—the breath of every one present was suspended.

In the minute that elapsed between the re-appearance of the jury and the delivery of their verdict by the foreman, the two prisoners lived whole centuries of indescribable anguish—passed through the bitterness of ten thousand deaths!

Scenes of the busy world without flashed through their minds: all the pleasures, delights, and enjoyments of existence swept across their imaginations with a pageantry the brilliancy of which was heightened a myriad times by the contrast which their own awful condition presented.

Could they be doomed to die?—oh! no—it was impossible! What earthly power could snatch them away from existence?—what human hand dared grasp the fatal thunderbolts of immortal Jove to hurl at *them?*

It appeared a dream—a whirling, maddening, horrible dream,—a frightful and appalling vision from which they would presently awake to the consciousness of its delusion and their own safety!

But—Ah!—what is that dreadful word which has just stricken their ears?

"GUILTY!"—— Oh! it is no dream—no vision: it is a fearful reality;—they are awake—and they are *there!*

Yes: the jury have given in their verdict;—and the Recorder places the black cap upon his head.

The Clerk of the Court calls the prisoners by their names: he inquires of them whether they have any reason to allege why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon them!

Reasons!—yes—ten thousand reasons! For the one is an old man who has but a few years to live in the ordinary course of nature, and it would be shocking to deprive him of that short, that trifling, that poor insignificant span: the other is young, in the prime of life, and with the vigorous constitution that promises half a century more of existence in this world! Oh! these facts suggest a myriad reasons wherefore they should not be doomed to die!

But their tongues cleave to the roofs of their mouths—they cannot utter a word—they cannot give vent to a single syllable; and yet they have so much to say!

An awful consternation is upon them: the lights in the Court appear to burn blue—the faces that are turned from all sides towards the dock, seem ghastly and hideous—the human beings by whom they are surrounded, assume spectral shapes to their imagination—the jury look like twelve fiends—the very judge is the arch-demon in their eyes!

Hark!—what are those solemn words which now break upon the awful stillness that had followed the crier's proclamation for silence?

'Tis the death-sentence which the Recorder is pronouncing!

But the prisoners cannot understand what he says: their brain is whirling fearfully—the lights are dancing before their eyes—spectral forms seem to be gathering in around them. Nevertheless they can comprehend this much—*that they are doomed to be hanged by the neck until they are dead*; and the judge winds up the barbarian sentence by invoking *the Almighty to have mercy upon their souls!*

The turnkey touches them upon the shoulder: they mechanically follow him away from the dock—and in a few minutes Martin is the tenant of one condemned cell, and Ramsey of another!

It being now past six o'clock the Recorder quitted the Court, to join the Sheriffs, the Ordinary, the Governor of Newgate, and some of the barristers, at the dinner-table; and the Common Serjeant took his seat upon the bench.

Stephen Price (*alias* the Big Beggarman) and Briggs were then placed in the dock.

They were charged with having kidnapped and detained in unlawful custody Sir Richard Stamford and Mr. Page; and, the case being thoroughly proven against them, they were sentenced to transportation for fifteen years.

With this trial the proceedings of the session terminated.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DUCHESS AND THE COUNTESS.

IT was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon—and while Martin and Ramsey were in the presence of their judge—that a lady alighted from a splendid equipage at the door of the Earl of Desborough's mansion in Berkeley Square. She was immediately ushered with great respect to one of the magnificent drawing-rooms belonging to that dwelling: and while she is waiting there until the Countess makes her appearance, we will indulge in a few words descriptive of her personal charms.

And charming she assuredly was, although in the thirty-eighth year of her age. Nature had lavished all her choicest gifts upon her form; and, though her countenance habitually wore a smiling sweetness of expression, yet there was an air of voluptuousness about her, surrounding and enveloping her as with a halo, that engendered undefinable sensations in the breast of the beholder—as if it were from love that she had borrowed the impress of her witching beauty!

Her hair was of a rich auburn, which wantoned in a thousand glossy and shining ringlets upon her shoulders, and gave her so youthful an appearance that, when it was thus arranged, she seemed to have scarcely reached her thirtieth year. Her eyes were large and of a deep hazel hue,—sometimes languishing and tender—at others lustrous with an overwhelming light,—sometimes with love beaming in every glance—at others flashing with the natural but latent haughtiness of a proud disposition.

Her complexion was of the purest white, save where on each plump and well-rounded cheek it blushed into the rose's hue; and her lips, full but not thick, were of the brightest coral. Her teeth were small, beautifully white, and faultlessly even; and, when she laughed, it appeared as if they were musical pearls that thus sent forth a delicious, soft, and silvery sound.

Her figure was on a large scale, but admirably proportioned, the fulness of the bust setting off the wasp-like symmetry of the waist: her arms were robust, but stainlessly white and exquisitely rounded, —and the graceful majesty of her walk indicated the fine and well-modelled length of limb which imparted to her gait its classic elegance and statuesque dignity.

Such was Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire—the idol of that sphere of fashion over which she presided with unquestioned sway, and from which she received all the blandishments of flattery and all the homage of worship and devotion.

Throwing herself upon a sofa with the ease and familiarity of one who knew and felt that she was in the abode of an intimate friend, the brilliant Duchess waited until Lady Desborough made her appearance; and when the latter entered the room after a few minutes' delay, their greeting was reciprocally cordial.

"Dearest Georgiana," said the Countess, "I am delighted to see you. It is an age since we last met."

"Nearly six months, Eleanor," responded the Duchess of Devonshire. "My tour in Scotland has been protracted beyond my original expectations: but at length, behold me once more in happy London. I only returned with his Grace last evening—and my first visit is paid to you."

"Your friendship, dear Georgiana, is most soothing and consolatory to me," said the Countess of Desborough, an involuntary sigh escaping her bosom.

"Heavens! you are unhappy," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, taking Eleanor's hand and pressing it affectionately. "Tell me, my beloved friend—what is the matter with you?—wherefore do you sigh?"

"Oh! it is nothing — nothing, I can assure you," answered the Countess, hastily. "But I have been somewhat indisposed to-day — a partial headache——"

"My dearest Eleanor, this excuse would pass current with a mere acquaintance," interrupted her Grace; "but not with a sincere—a very sincere friend. Recollect Eleanor, we have known each other since our childhood, I might almost say—notwithstanding there is a difference of ten years between my age and yours. Therefore, as an elder sister do I speak to you—for as a sister I love you, Eleanor."

"How can I sufficiently testify my gratitude for these generous expressions?" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough.

"By making me the confidant of your secret sorrow," was the prompt answer: "for a secret sorrow am I assured that you cherish. But imagine not for an instant, Eleanor, that a base and contemptible feeling of curiosity urges me thus to address you. Intimate as I have been with you—devoted in our friendship as we are towards each other—this is the first time that I have ever ventured to touch upon so delicate a topic. Often and often have I beheld you pensive — thoughtful— melancholy—unhappy: and I have longed to throw my arms round your neck, and implore you to confide your sorrows to me, that I might sympathise and console. Six years have now passed since you became the Countess of Desborough—and I know that the alliance which you have formed has not ensured your felicity. Nay—this much is no secret with the world generally: but the cause is unsuspected—unknown—beyond all power of conjecture. To me, I confess, it is the greatest of mysteries: for the noble earl, your husband, appears to possess every qualification adapted to render your existence a paradise and win your best affections. Tell me, then, dearest Eleanor —tell your sincerest and most attached friend the source of your sorrow. Perhaps I may be enabled to counsel and advise: at all events I am certain to sympathise with you and offer such consolation as it may be in my power to impart."

"The world, then, is aware that his lordship and myself dwell not together in the sweet harmony of matrimonial bliss?" said the Countess of Desborough, casting down her looks, while a deep carnation suffused her clear olive cheeks.

"Such is indeed the case, Eleanor," returned Georgiana. "But, understand me well—the world attributes no blame to you—your reputation is unsullied—scandal has never dared to whisper a syllable against you."

"Oh! it would be cruel indeed if it were otherwise!" exclaimed Eleanor, with a degree of bitterness which surprised her friend. "But pray let us change the conversation—let us pass to some other topic."

"Have you no faith in friendship?" asked the Duchess of Devonshire, in a gentle tone of reproach: "can you not conceive that by unbosoming yourself to me, you will be consoled and comforted? Or do you fancy that the giddy whirl of pleasure and fashionable dissipation has rendered me so thoroughly heartless ——"

"Oh! no—no!" interrupted the Countess, shocked by the cruel suspicion thus implied: "I know that you are everything kind — generous — affectionate ——"

"Then you will trust me?—you will confide in me?" said Georgiana, her tone assuming the tenderness of the most unfeigned friendship. "You do not require from my lips the assurance that your secret, whatever it may be, will rest as a sacred deposit in my bosom—never, never to be revealed."

"I know not what to say!" exclaimed Eleanor, clasping her hands in a sudden paroxysm of anguish, while a tear rolled down each blushing cheek. "I am bewildered, Georgiana—I am uncertain how to act! Your kindness prompts me to unbosom myself without reserve: but, on the other hand, feelings which I cannot explain——"

"Oh! you are indeed unhappy, my sweet friend," interrupted her Grace; "and yet you hesitate to allow me the means of sympathising with you! Eleanor, this is cruel—this is unjust—for you are

well aware that since you were eight years old and I was eighteen, our attachment to each other has never been for a moment marred by a harsh word or a cold look."

"This is true—most true," murmured the Countess of Desborough; "and were I to make any one a confidant of the secret sorrow which, I admit, weighs upon my heart, that friend would be yourself."

"Is it possible that you can love another?—that you hate your husband for that other's sake?" ejaculated the Duchess, a sudden idea striking her.

"No — no," responded the Countess of Desborough: then, in an altered and far more solemn tone, she added, "Never yet have I felt what love is!"

"You did not love the Earl when you married him?" exclaimed Georgiana, profoundly surprised. "This, then, was at least a secret which you kept from me. But surely his conduct must have been such as to win your affections?—surely he cannot seem tender, loving, and attentive in public, and ill-treat you in private?"

"Not for worlds would I have you think so ill of Francis!" cried the Countess, emphatically. "No—he has surrounded me with all the elements of that happiness which gold can procure; and his constant study is to render my life as agreeable as it may be."

"This mystery is incomprehensible!" said the Duchess. "I am pained—grieved to the inmost recesses of my heart—to think that my best friend should be unhappy, and that she should fear to entrust me with the cause of her sorrow."

"You know not how I long—how ardently I crave to unbosom myself to you, dearest Georgiana," returned the Countess, bending upon her companion those eyes which were usually so brilliant and lustrous, but which were now so mournful and melting. "Your words have already penetrated like a balm into my soul—the tender sympathy which you have manifested towards me, has done me good. Yes—the love of a dear friend must be an incalculable relief: but it would kill me to think that this friend should ever have cause to blush for her in whose behalf she has shown such generous feelings."

"I blush for you, Eleanor!" exclaimed the Duchess, more and more astonished at this species of self-accusation on the part of the Countess: "Oh! that were impossible! I know you to be virtue itself."

"But is there not the sin of the thoughts as well as of the actions?" inquired Eleanor, in a subdued and mournful tone. "Alas! since the confession must be made—and I see that I cannot resist the influence which prompts me now to unbosom my soul to you——"

"Speak freely—fearlessly," said the Duchess, observing that her friend still hesitated. "It will prove one of the most delicious moments of my life if I can in any way sooth the secret sorrow which you cherish."

"Ere now, my beloved Georgiana," resumed the Countess, "you complimented me by saying that I was virtue itself. But you know not how unworthy I am of the good opinion which you have thus formed of me! It is true that if the chastity of the body be all that is required to constitute virtue, I am indeed virtuous. But may not a polluted soul dwell in a chaste body, even as a pure soul may inhabit a body that is polluted? The woman whose honour is violently wrested from her by the miscreant ravisher, is still chaste in mind though tainted in person: and, on the other hand, the woman who is even a virgin in bodily innocence may be a very Messalina in passions, cravings, and desires. Do you understand me, my dear friend?" asked the Countess, without raising her head, but with a burning blush suffusing her entire countenance and pouring its crimson glow over her neck, her shoulders, and her bosom.

"I understand that you have involved yourself in a net of sophistry and metaphysical argument which cannot regard yourself," responded the Duchess. "It is true that virtue may be a negative quality only, in some instances: but as you have already assured me that you love no man, you have no possible inducement to prove faithless to your husband. Were you enamoured of some handsome youth, and were you on that account wrestling against temptation, it would not be difficult to comprehend your position."

"And then, perhaps, the crime were more venial than when the soul has to combat with passions and cravings which have no particular object to excite them," murmured Eleanor, covering her countenance with her hands.

"I understand you at length!" whispered the Duchess of Devonshire, leaning towards her friend on whose shoulder she placed her hand: "you are upon those unhappy terms with your husband which deprive you of the enjoyment of conjugal rites—and you are not of a temperament to allow so saint-like an existence to be even tolerable. If this be the case, Eleanor, you need not blush to avow it—for I candidly admit that the result of such privation would be the same with me."

"And yet we are so differently situated," exclaimed the Countess, raising her blushing face timidly towards that of the brilliant and voluptuous Georgiana: "for as yet you have only obtained an insight into a portion of my secret—you have only learnt the least and most insignificant part of my weakness. Alas! you alluded to the unhappy terms on which I exist with my husband: but you have yet to hear and be amazed at the cause of that severance which is scarcely veiled by the mockery of our living beneath the same roof."

"And this cause—what can it be?" asked Georgiana, taking her friend's hand and pressing it between both her own.

The Countess of Desborough hesitated upwards of a minute: she was evidently afraid of giving a reply to the question—and she was unable to find language wherewith to frame that answer. But suddenly calling all her courage to aid her in achieving a confession which had gone thus far, she placed her lips to the ears of the Duchess, and hastily whispered a few words.

The magnificent Georgiana started as if a serpent had stung her—so amazed was she by the extraordinary and unexpected revelation which she had thus heard: but Eleanor, devoured with shame, and unable to endure the look of mingled incredulity, surprise, and compassion which the Duchess fixed upon her, threw herself on the bosom of her friend, and, concealing her burning countenance there, gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears.

"My poor Eleanor, be comforted," at length said the Duchess of Devonshire: "it is not grief

which you should pour forth—but vengeance which you should crave."

"No—no: not vengeance," sobbed the generous-souled Countess: "for *he* has done all that mortal could to make amends for a flagrant wrong. Alas!" she continued, raising her head, and casting down the eyes on the long lashes of which trembled the pearly drops; "I hate and detest myself when I think that such a circumstance should embitter my days. But vainly, vainly do I struggle with those passions which consume me—those desires which rage at times so furiously in my bosom!"

"Eleanor, you are an angel of virtue, whereas you would represent yourself to be a demoness of profligate thoughts and wanton ideas!" exclaimed Georgiana. "There is something more than a negative virtue in your chastity—your forbearance—your purity! But, believe me," added the Duchess emphatically,—"believe me when I declare that you will continue to exist the veriest simpleton in Europe, if you thus adhere to that virtue which is nothing more nor less than a sentimentalism so highly refined and so marvellously sublimated as to be incompatible with the grossness of even the purest mortal nature."

"What would you advise me, Georgiana?" asked the Countess, trembling with an undefinable sensation of mingled terror and delight,—terror at the idea of being tempted into evil, and delight at the thought of the evil into which she was thus to be tempted.

"I would regard what you term virtue as a chain and would cast it off," was the unhesitating and emphatic response.

"Oh! I regret now that I have made you my confidant," exclaimed Eleanor: "for you give form and substance to those ideas the existence of which in my own heart I have never until now dared to acknowledge to myself!"

"You are a perfect phenomenon, Eleanor," returned the Duchess. "But I have a great mind to tell you a little secret of my own—for I also have a secret, I can assure you," she added, with an arch smile of ineffable sweetness.

"Oh! but your secret is not one that gives you pain, and that you blush to own!" said the Countess.

"It certainly gives me no pain," rejoined the Duchess of Devonshire: "and yet I may perhaps blush as I reveal it to you. But if I make you my confidant in that respect, it is only to prove to you that I really regard you in the light of a sister."

"And this secret?" said Eleanor, her curiosity being raised.

"It is explained in a few words," was the response. "I have a lover!"

"Doubtless! Worshipped and adored as you are, Georgiana," said the comparatively unsophisticated Countess, "you have hundreds. But a lover in any other sense of the term——"

"Yes—a lover in *that* sense," interrupted the Duchess. "I mean that I have yielded to a phantasy—a whim—a wanton caprice—and have erred without one hundredth part of the excuse which you would have for erring in a similar manner."

"Is this possible, Georgiana?" exclaimed the Countess, with an astonishment most real and unfeigned.

"It is true, I can assure you," answered the profligate patrician. "And now are you not ashamed of me?"

"No: I begin to see things in a new light," rejoined Eleanor, gradually becoming familiarised with the contemplation of immorality; and when she remembered that the Princess Sophia herself had yielded to the delights of illicit love, she wondered that she should ever have adhered so rigidly to her own virtuous principles.

"It is not a year ago," continued the Duchess, "that I succumbed to that phantasy and became faithless to my husband. I was seated alone, and in a pensive mood, on a sofa in the Red Drawing-room at Devonshire House. It was between four and five in the afternoon. Presently the door was thrown open—and a visitor was announced. You know him well: he is one of the handsomest men in Europe. He seated himself by my side upon the sofa—and a conversation on various indifferent topics progressed for some little time. At length I observed that he was surveying me with an earnest attention—an attention which at the moment I fancied to amount almost to rudeness; and the blood rushed to my cheeks. He threw himself on his knees before me—took my hand—pressed it to his lips—and declared that if he had offended me, he would never rise until he had obtained my pardon."

"How singular!" ejaculated the Countess. "Something very much resembling all this, occurred to myself about three weeks ago. Yes—I also was seated alone and in a pensive mood—in this very room, and on this very sofa—and a visitor came: he is certainly one of the handsomest men in England—and you know him well——But pray continue your narrative, my dear friend," cried Eleanor, suddenly interrupting herself in the midst of the broken explanations which she was giving in a mood of almost involuntary musing.

"Well—as I was observing," resumed the Duchess, "*my* visitor vowed that he would not rise until I pardoned him—which I hastened to do, although, if questioned, I could scarcely have defined the offence which he had committed. Placing himself again by my side, he dexterously and with amazing artifice continued the discourse in such a manner, that he gradually brought it to a point at which he suddenly, and as if in a burst of unconquerable enthusiasm, declared his admiration—his passion—his love. I know not what reply I made: but I recollect well that in another moment I was clasped in his arms——"

"More singular still!" ejaculated the Countess. "The adventure which I considered to be so insulting to myself, was precisely the same."

"But the results were assuredly very different," returned the Duchess: "for whereas you must have passed pure and immaculate through the ordeal, I accepted the declaration of love—and that same evening I visited Carlton House privately and in disguise."

"Carlton House!" exclaimed Eleanor, with increasing wonderment.

"Yes—for the lover to whom I have alluded is the Prince of Wales," rejoined Georgiana.

"And it was the Prince of Wales who would have made a victim of me!" cried the Countess.

"Then is it most singular that my love-story should have elicited yours, the hero being the same," said the Duchess, by no means chagrined at

this proof of her royal paramour's fickleness. "I am not jealous of the Prince: it were ridiculous to be so. I am well aware that his love-adventures are innumerable; and if I were to sigh each time I learn that I have a rival in his caprices—for we will not call them affections—I should be only making myself miserable from morning to night."

"True!" murmured Eleanor, in whose bosom new and exciting thoughts had been engendered by all that the Duchess of Devonshire had said to her on this occasion.

"And therefore, my dear friend," added the wanton and voluptuous Georgiana, "if you should think fit to lend a willing ear to the Prince's seductive words, I shall not experience the slightest annoyance. But I must now say farewell, Eleanor—and I shall expect to see you at Devonshire House in the course of to-morrow or next day: for I must assuredly become your tutress and guide into the realms of pleasure. Adieu, my dear friend."

With these words, the Duchess embraced Lady Desborough, and took her departure.

Eleanor had escorted her Grace as far as the landing outside the apartment;—and, as she was returning slowly and in a thoughtful mood to her seat upon the sofa, it suddenly flashed to her mind like a glare of lightning, that if any one had happened to be in the inner drawing-room it were easy to have overheard some portion, if not the whole of the preceding conversation, the two saloons being only separated from each other by folding-doors.

A terrible sickness seized upon the heart of the Countess as this source of alarm sprang up in her mind; and opening one of the doors, she entered the adjacent apartment.

But a vertigo appeared to fasten upon her brain, when she caught sight of her husband—yes, the Earl of Desborough—seated at the table apparently bending, over a book, and with his back towards her.

She staggered a few paces and was on the point of falling: but in a moment she perceived the tremendous precipice on which she stood—in an instant she saw the necessity of gathering all her courage and presence of mind to her aid, if she wished to relieve herself from a state of awful suspense and ascertain whether he had actually overheard her conversation with the Duchess, or not.

"What! are you here?" she said, in a faint and faltering tone, advancing at the same time and laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"Ah! my dearest Eleanor," he exclaimed, starting up: *but it struck her that he was very pale!*

"Have you been here long?" she asked, her tone becoming still more tremulous, and her entire frame quivering like an aspen leaf.

"Yes—that is, not many minutes," he replied, instantly correcting his first monosyllabic answer. "I have been reading that book, and was so absorbed in its contents that I really forgot how long I could have been here."

And he smiled—but, as it struck her, *with, a ghastly attempt to conceal horrible thoughts!*

"What book is it?" she inquired, hastily bending down her head to hide the shame which flushed her cheeks—and not shame only, but torturing terror of the most agonising nature.

No pen can describe the exquisite acuteness to which her feelings were now wrought up, when she saw that the volume lying open on the table was upside down! The barbed point of a lance thrust into her heart and then torn violently out again—supposing that it were possible to live through such an infernal process of cruelty—could not have been accompanied with an anguish more rending than that which the unhappy lady now felt. Her brain was on fire—molten lead was circulating in her veins—the tortures of hell were lacerating her soul.

But suddenly it flashed to her imagination that her husband might have turned the book in this manner at the moment when he started from his seat at the words which she had addressed to him and on feeling her hand upon his shoulder. Revived by the hope, which was instantly followed by the thought that if he *had* overheard her conversation with the Duchess it would be impossible for him to appear even as cool and collected as he was, Eleanor raised her countenance again, saying, "Were you not aware that an old friend of mine was with me just now? She would have been delighted to see you."

"Yes—I understood that you had company—the Duchess of Devonshire, was it not?" observed the Earl, in a tone which struck the Countess to be ominously peculiar and unnatural. "But I did not choose to disturb you," he added, almost immediately: "besides, I do not feel very well this afternoon."

"Has anything occurred to vex or annoy you, Francis?" inquired the Countess: and, as she spoke, she darted a rapid but searching—scrutinising—penetrating glance upon her husband's countenance.

"Annoy me! Oh! nothing—nothing, I can assure you, dear Eleanor," he exclaimed, taking her hand and carrying it to his lips: then, instantly dropping it—and, as she thought at least, with singular abruptness, as if it had suddenly become loathsome to him after his mouth had thus touched it—he said, "No—I have nothing to annoy me—unless it be the perverse conduct of Fernanda, in so obstinately refusing the reparation which Arthur Eaton so honourably offered. Have you seen Fernanda to-day?"

"She has kept her room, as you know, almost ever since her return home a few days ago," answered Eleanor, gradually becoming reassured, though still experiencing an oppressive uneasiness—for she could not subdue the idea that there *was* something remarkably strange, forced, and unnatural in her husband's manner.

At this moment a domestic entered to announce that dinner was served.

The Earl instantly proffered Eleanor his arm; and, as he escorted her to the dining-room below, he turned the conversation on some leading topic of the day, and which was quite distinct from their own concerns: then, after they were seated at table, he continued to discourse in the same strain, and with a better flow of spirits than he was accustomed to enjoy. The result was that Eleanor's apprehensions gradually subsided, until they passed away altogether;—and, feeling convinced that her husband had *not* overheard anything which occurred between herself and the Duchess of Devonshire, she concluded that what she had fancied to be an ominous singularity of manner on his part was only the work of her own fevered imagination and guilty conscience.

For Eleanor *did* look upon the revelation which she had made to the Duchess and the thoughts to which she had yielded subsequently, as crimes which she had committed!

CHAPTER LIX.

THE COUNTESS AND THE MILLINER.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock on the following morning, Mrs. Brace, attended by a young person dressed in mourning, alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of the Earl of Desborough's mansion in Berkeley Square.

The young person just alluded to, carried a large band-box in her hand: for, being the junior assistant in Mrs. Brace's establishment, it was her duty to accompany her mistress on such occasions as the present. She however remained below in a species of waiting-room opening from the hall, while the milliner, taking the band-box, ascended to the bedchamber of the Countess.

Eleanor, having passed a restless and feverish night, had not long risen from her couch. Dressed in a charming *deshabillée*, she was half-reclining in a capacious arm-chair near the fire, and playing with rather than partaking of the cup of chocolate which stood on a little table at her right hand.

Her raven hair was negligently gathered up into bands, the rich masses of which framed with ebony her spotless forehead: she was pale—and an appearance of languor was expressed on her countenance and pervaded her entire form.

The lady's-maid, having ushered in Mrs. Brace, immediately retired; and the milliner was left alone with the Countess.

"I had really forgotten my appointment with you, this morning," said the latter.

"If it will suit your ladyship better, I can easily call again," answered Mrs. Brace, in her most dulcet tones.

"No—I would not give you so much trouble, since

you have come on purpose," rejoined the Countess. "Have you brought the purple velvet dress ——"

"I am invariably punctual in executing your ladyship's commands," observed the milliner.

As she thus spoke, she laid aside her bonnet and scarf and proceeded to open the band-box. First she took out several beautiful lace caps, which she carefully placed upon the bed; and then she drew forth a superb velvet dress, made in accordance with a fashion which she herself had artistically devised and which she hoped, through the aid of the brilliant Countess of Desborough, to bring into vogue.

Rising from her seat, and slowly divesting herself of the elegant morning wrapper which she wore, Eleanor proceeded to try on the new dress in front of a psyche, or full-length looking-glass, which reflected her fine figure on its polished surface. Indeed, as she thus stood for a few moments, with her exquisitely shaped shoulders, her beauteous neck, and her well-rounded arms completely bare,—with the closely fitting but not tightly-laced corset setting off her symmetry, and developing every contour,—and with her feet and ankles, up to the swell of the leg, appearing below the short petticoat, she seemed a perfect model of loveliness; and Mrs. Brace could not help thinking at the time that it was indeed no wonder if the Prince of Wales burnt so ardently to possess her.

The velvet robe was tried on—and it fitted admirably. The low body revealed half the bust—the arms were left bare almost to the very shoulders, where the miniature sleeves were looped up with rows of pearls—and from the waist the glossy skirt flowed in massive folds, shining with a lustrous richness where the light from the windows fell upon them, and deeply dark in the shades between.

"You are really a most accomplished *artiste* in your profession," said the Countess of Desborough, well pleased with the result of the experiment, and surveying herself in the glass not altogether without a feeling of vanity—for she saw that she was handsome—gloriously handsome; and the thought raised up a glow of pride to her cheeks so pale before.

"I thank your ladyship for the compliment," returned Mrs. Brace, whose full and largely rounded form presented a voluptuous contrast with the elegant, graceful, and dignified loveliness of the patrician. "Permit me to observe that this dress suits your ladyship admirably: it will undulate with every movement, and thereby become almost as expressive as gestures."

"Your art, then, has its mysteries as well as those which are acknowledged to be of a more complex nature," said the Countess of Desborough, with a smile.

"Your ladyship perhaps is unaware how much depends upon the dress," returned the milliner. "The most faultless shape may be rendered faulty thereby; and it should be made so as to accompany, as it were, each and every motion of the form, as if it were a part thereof. The great secrets of the art are to do justice to a fine figure, and improve a bad one."

"You should write a treatise upon the mysteries of that art, Mrs. Brace," said the Countess, smiling again at the information which her milliner was imparting.

"Pardon me, my lady," responded the latter; "but these are secrets which must not be published to the world in general. Oh! I can assure your ladyship that Mrs. Fitzherbert, her Grace of Devonshire, Lady Jersey, and many others of my most eminent patronesses often condescend to listen to me while I explain these things."

"Ah! you are employed by Mrs. Fitzherbert, Lady Jersey, and my dear friend the Duchess of Devonshire?" said the Countess in a musing tone—for it struck her as being singular that Mrs. Brace should have mentioned by name three ladies who were intimately connected with the Prince of Wales.

"Such is the fact, I can assure your ladyship," answered the milliner. "And perhaps your ladyship will excuse me for mentioning that his Royal Highness the heir-apparent never fancies any dress worn by Mrs. Fitzherbert, unless made at my establishment."

"Is his Royal Highness so excellent a connoisseur in respect to lady's attire?" asked Eleanor, as she laid aside her new velvet dress and, resuming her morning-wrapper, threw herself languidly back again into the large arm-chair—her pretty feet, imprisoned in elegant slippers, now resting on an ottoman.

"Since your ladyship puts the question to me," responded Mrs. Brace, thus ingeniously directing the discourse towards the topic on which she was anxious to touch,—"I will unhesitatingly inform you that his Royal Highness is not only an excellent judge in such matters, but that he volunteers his opinion on many points at those times when I have the honour to wait on Mrs. Fitzherbert in order to submit the latest fashions to her. Would your ladyship be offended if I were to confess that Mrs. Fitzherbert has seen your velvet robe, and highly approves of it?"

"Oh! certainly I cannot be offended on that account," exclaimed Eleanor. "But how did it happen?"

"I waited upon Mrs. Fitzherbert an hour ago to exhibit those beautiful caps," continued Mrs. Brace, indicating the objects of her remark, and which she had carefully deposited upon the bed: "when I opened the band-box, she caught a glimpse of the velvet dress and insisted upon seeing it. I dared not refuse compliance with her demand—and she was enchanted. Indeed, to tell your ladyship the truth, I am to make her one according to the same fashion without delay. But, by the bye," added the milliner, with a frankness and candour so well assumed that the Countess was completely duped by the apparent artlessness of her manner,—"I should have observed that his Royal Highness was seated at breakfast with Mrs. Fitzherbert at the time—and that——But, no—I dare not say any more."

And Mrs. Brace pretended to be suddenly animated by a second thought which threw her into confusion.

"Oh! I cannot allow you to break off thus in the middle of your narrative," exclaimed Eleanor, whose curiosity was excited, she scarcely knew why—unless, indeed, it were by a presentiment that the Prince had mentioned her name in complimentary terms.

"If your ladyship's commands be that I should tell you everything which really occurred this morning at Carlton House," said Mrs. Brace, "I cannot of course prove disobedient."

"Yes—let me hear it all," returned Eleanor, half-ashamed at thus indulging in what she could only look upon as the most frivolous gossip: and yet her heart palpitated all the while.

"Well, I will be explicit," continued Mrs. Brace

who was thus deliberately and coolly inventing a scene at Carlton House which had not taken place at all; for she had come direct from her own abode to Berkeley Square, and had not set eyes on Mrs. Fitzherbert for some weeks past. "The moment I produced your splendid velvet dress, Mrs. Fitzherbert was in raptures—and she insisted upon knowing whom it was for. I accordingly mentioned your ladyship's name; upon hearing which, his Royal Highness burst forth into such enthusiastic praises of your ladyship's beauty—figure—elegant gait—and fascinating manners, that——But I am really trembling from head to foot lest I should offend your ladyship?" exclaimed the artful milliner, appearing to be suddenly seized with renewed confusion and embarrassment.

"Nay—I am not so easily chagrined or hurt," exclaimed Eleanor, affecting to experience no other sentiment than that of amusement at this tittle-tattle—whereas her bosom was in reality heaving with indescribable emotions. "Proceed, Mrs. Brace: you divert me much, I can assure you."

"I thank your ladyship for relieving me of the apprehension that I might give offence," resumed the wily milliner, who failed not to observe that the Countess was rapidly becoming more deeply interested in her narrative. "I was informing your ladyship that the Prince broke out into enthusiastic,—nay, I may almost add, rapturous eulogies on your ladyship's style of loveliness;—and he was continuing in this strain—evidently carried away by the impulse of his feelings—when Mrs. Fitzherbert interrupted him sharply. For, I do not mind telling your ladyship,—since we *have* entered upon the subject,—that his Royal Highness *did* say enough—and far more than enough to provoke Mrs. Fitzherbert's jealousy. In fact, as I have already had the honour of informing your ladyship, nothing could equal his enthusiasm."

"And what did Mrs. Fitzherbert say?" inquired Eleanor, her cheeks glowing as she recalled to mind the impassioned kisses that the heir-apparent had imprinted on her lips when he held her in his arms on that memorable afternoon the particulars of which had never escaped her memory.

"Mrs. Fitzherbert exclaimed, '*Everybody knows that Lady Desborough is one of the handsomest women in England: but you need not dwell upon her charms, for all that!*'—To which the Prince replied, '*There is no harm in admiring a beautiful creature like the Countess: indeed, a man must possess a heart of stone who cannot worship female loveliness wherever it exists.*'—These were the principal observations that passed," added the designing Mrs. Brace; "and now your ladyship has compelled me to reveal everything."

"And are you sure that there is no exaggeration in your narrative?" exclaimed Eleanor, affecting to laugh, while in reality she was deeply moved—and had the Prince been with her at that moment, and none else present, his Royal Highness would not perhaps have been repulsed as on the former occasion.

"I can assure your ladyship that I have not coloured my tale in the least," said Mrs. Brace. "By the bye, I am to return again to Carlton House in the afternoon, with the patterns of the velvet for Mrs. Fitzherbert's dress."

"Well—but what induced you to tell me that you were to return thither?" inquired the Countess of Desborough.

"Oh! nothing my lady!" ejaculated the milliner "Only I was thinking how annoyed Mrs. Fitzherbert would be, if—just for the sake of a little mischief—I were to tell his Royal Highness in her presence that I had communicated to your ladyship all the particulars which occurred ere now at Carlton House."

"You cannot dream of such a thing!" ejaculated Eleanor, her pride suddenly prevailing over the tender and voluptuous thoughts which had been excited in her bosom. "Not for worlds would I have you be guilty of such an imprudence! Indeed, I perceive that I was wrong to indulge in this idle gossip, Mrs. Brace," she added haughtily.

"Pray forgive me for the indiscretion which I have perpetrated!" cried the milliner, appearing to be quite grieved at this sudden change in the manner of her patroness: and, in fact, she saw that she had gone a little too far. "No, my lady—I am incapable of such conduct, I can assure you. At the same time, it must be as galling to Mrs. Fitzherbert to know that the Prince is desperately in love with your ladyship, as it is complimentary to you."

"You do not mean to imply that the few flattering phrases which his Royal Highness condescended to utter concerning me, denote anything of so serious a nature on his part?" said Eleanor, with a softened tone and manner.

"If I were to explain my real sentiments to your ladyship, you would only upbraid me again," observed the milliner, affecting to be busied in putting on her bonnet and scarf preparatory to taking her departure.

"No—I promise to be less hasty with you, my good Mrs. Brace," said the Countess. "Speak frankly and candidly: for although it be but idle gossip—the mere pastime of chit-chat ——"

"Precisely so, my lady," said the milliner. "You have given me permission to explain my real sentiments? Well—I will tell you honestly and sincerely, then, how I read the feelings of his Royal Highness. He loves—he adores—he worships you!"

"Mrs. Brace, this is language which I dare not listen to!" exclaimed Eleanor, the crimson tide flooding her cheeks—her neck—her very bosom.

"Did I not say that your ladyship would only scold me?" cried the milliner, affecting to be plunged into the most painful bewilderment. "What am I to do? Your ladyship condescends to listen to me—commands me to speak frankly—and then covers me with your displeasure."

"I was wrong, my good creature," said the Countess of Desborough: "for I admit that I gave you encouragement to make this extraordinary and most unexpected revelation. But how can you possibly be so foolish as to construe into a serious sentiment the few idle compliments which the Prince was pleased to utter concerning me?"

"Ah! my lady," returned Mrs. Brace, "if you had studied human nature as profoundly as I have done, your ladyship would not be so sceptical. There is a wide and essential difference between mere passing flattery and those enthusiastic praises which come from the heart. Think you, my lady, that the Prince, in a moment of perfect good temper, would wantonly provoke a quarrel with Mrs. Fitzherbert by exciting her jealousy? Assuredly not. The truth is, that he was carried away by his feelings—he was borne along by the tide of rapturous emotions—and the words he uttered flowed irresistibly from his heart.

Had his life depended on the issue, he could not have stayed that passionate ebullition of glowing praises. The spell of your ladyship's beauty gave an impulse to his language, which rendered him magnificently eloquent: and, Oh! how handsome and god-like did he appear when thus breathing forth the evidences of a love—an ardent love—the existence of which he could not conceal even though in the presence of Mrs. Fitzherbert! His soul, speaking through his eyes as intelligibly as by his tongue, was one flame of passion. His cheeks mantled and his heart throbbed, as if the incantation of your witching beauty was upon him. Oh! I could read all that was passing in his mind—in his heart—in the profundities of his soul:—and I pitied him!"

"You pitied him?" said Eleanor, in a languid and tremulous tone, as a thousand agitating thoughts and tender feelings swept through her.

"Pardon me for making the observation, my lady," returned the milliner, throwing some emotion into her own voice; "but I must frankly confess that I *did* pity him then—*do* pity him now!"

"Then he loves me!" murmured Eleanor, leaning her head upon her hand and falling into a deep reverie, which lasted several minutes: at length, raising her eyes, and starting at beholding Mrs. Brace whose presence she had forgotten during that interval of profound meditation, she said, "You must think me very vain—very silly—very foolish to have listened with so much apparent attention to all you have been telling me: but it has served to while away an hour," she added, glancing at the time-piece upon the mantel;—"and I thank you for your kind endeavours to amuse me."

"I hope your ladyship does not imagine that I have uttered a single word which is not literally true, or in which I do not conscientiously believe," said Mrs. Brace.

"No—I give you credit for sincerity," responded Eleanor: then, her pride again coming to her aid, she observed in a tone which denoted her desire that the conversation should end, "You may leave two of the morning-caps—those which you think will become me best."

Mrs. Brace was too discreet not to take the hint thus conveyed: she accordingly made her curtsey and withdrew.

But as the crafty and designing milliner descended the stairs, she chuckled inwardly at the effect which she saw had been produced by her specious language on the mind of the Countess of Desborough; and she said to herself, "That proud patrician lady will ere long surrender the fortalice of her charms to the Prince!"

On entering the waiting-room adjoining the hall, the milliner found the young lady in deep mourning whom she had left there, conversing with a tall, thin, pale, but very handsome and interesting young man, dressed in a neat though homely garb.

"Now, Miss Morton, my dear," said Mrs. Brace: "we will return home."

"I am at your service, madam," answered the beautiful girl; and, with a gentle inclination of the head towards the young man, she followed her mistress from the room.

When they were in the hackney-coach together, the milliner said, "Who was that person you were talking to, Camilla?"

"He is a stranger to me, madam," was the prompt and ingenuous reply. "Indeed, he had not been in the apartment many minutes ere you came. Some civil remark which he made rendered it necessary for me to give him an equally courteous answer: but if you are offended with me, madam, for speaking to one totally unknown to me, I can assure you that I gave him no encouragement to address me."

"My dear Camilla," said Mrs. Brace, in her kindest tone, "I am not in the least vexed with you. I know that you are a good girl and will follow my advice in all things; and that is sufficient. Indeed, I have promised to become a mother to you—and I will keep my word."

"Oh! my dear madam, how grateful am I to you for this assurance!" exclaimed the young girl who was as beautiful as the sweet Christian name to which she answered, and who now appeared deeply—dceply interesting as her eyes flashed looks of gratitude through her tears, as if they were lighted up with twin-drops of the diamond dew.

"Come, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace; "wipe away all traces of weeping—for you have a little commission to execute for me at this house where the coach is about to stop."

And as the milliner uttered these words, the vehicle, in pursuance of the directions which she had already given to the driver, drew up at the front door of a splendid mansion in Piccadilly.

"I am anxious that this note," said Mrs. Brace, handing Camilla a neatly folded billet, "should be delivered to Lord Florimel—and to him only. It must not be conveyed through a servant—and I do not wish to deliver it myself. The truth is, my love," added the milliner, in a hasty and confidential whisper, "it is a little money-matter—a debt which one of his lordship's lady-cousins owes me—and I know that all my previous applications for payment have been intercepted, when addressed to him. He will settle his extravagant relative's liability, if we can manage that the note shall only reach him."

"I understand you, madam," said the artless, innocent, and unsuspecting Camilla, perfectly satisfied with this explanation, every word of which was of course false: "you desire me to solicit an interview with his lordship, and place the note in his hands."

"That is exactly what I mean, my love," responded Mrs. Brace, with bland tone and caressing manner.

The beautiful girl, anxious to testify her readiness to oblige a mistress who promised to be a mother to her, descended from the vehicle; and, the front door of the mansion being by this time open in obedience to the summons given by the coachman, she inquired of the powdered and lace-bedizened lacquey whether Lord Florimel was at home. An answer was returned in the affirmative; and she was conducted into a small but elegantly-furnished parlour, where the young nobleman, in a morning-garb, was lounging in an arm-chair close by the blazing fire, perusing a novel.

The instant that Camilla made her appearance, he was struck by the beauty of her person, the modesty of her demeanour, and the sylph-like symmetry of her form. Advancing bashfully—almost timidly—towards him, she presented the note, observing in a soft and silver tone, "Mrs. Brace sends this, my lord, with her respectful compliments."

Florimel instantly comprehended, by the fact of the fair creature being in mourning, that she was the

same young person of whom Mrs. Brace had spoken to him on that morning when she received him in her bed-chamber, and when he so nearly surrendered to the attractions of her matured and voluptuous charms. Casting upon Miss Morton another look of deep and tender interest, Florimel opened the note, which contained only these words:—

"What think you, my dear friend, of the bearer of this? You are a naughty man for not coming to see me. Pray explain this absence of several days—not by letter, but in person. I shall expect you to sup with me on any evening you may choose to appoint; and if it be agreeable to you, I can promise that the bearer, Miss Camilla Morton, shall be of the party. All you need now say to her is that you will attend to the note."

For a moment a cloud passed over Lord Florimel's countenance, as the thought swept across his imagination that Mrs. Brace was determined to throw temptation in his way and seduce him from the allegiance and fidelity which he had sworn to the lovely Pauline: but when he again fixed his eyes upon the charming girl who stood bashfully waiting his answer to the billet, he had not the moral courage to deliver an unfavourable response. He accordingly said, "Tell your kind mistress, that I will give my early attention to her letter."

Camilla thanked his lordship and retired, followed by the looks of the young and noble voluptuary, who was enraptured by the elegance of the retreating figure which his eyes thus devoured, and ravished by the glimpse which he caught of a foot and ankle of the most enchanting shape.

But just at the moment when Miss Morton was descending the steps of the front-door, two young ladies—beautifully dressed, extremely handsome, and evidently sisters — who happened to be passing, stopped short; and one of them, exclaiming to the other, "That is Gabriel's house!" fixed a searching look upon Camilla.

The young girl, though utterly unconscious of having done anything wrong, nevertheless blushed up to the very forehead on finding herself the object of this unaccountable scrutiny;—and the lady from whose lips the ejaculation had burst and who was thus intently regarding her, said in a somewhat imperious tone, "I presume, Miss, that you have been to see Lord Florimel?"

Camilla was so confused that she could make no reply; and the blush upon her cheeks deepened into the liveliest crimson.

"Oh! I comprehend it all!" exclaimed the young lady, drawing herself up with a superb dignity, while the glow of wounded pride flushed her magnificent countenance: then turning to her sister, she said, "Come, Octavia—let us continue our walk."

And as the two ladies passed on together, Camilla hurried into the vehicle, whence Mrs. Brace had observed all that had just occurred.

The hackney-coach proceeded towards Pall Mall; and the milliner, after receiving the message which Lord Florimel had sent her, and at which she was secretly delighted, said, "Those two ladies behaved very rudely to you, my love: but it was evidently some misapprehension on their part."

"I am afraid that I did wrong in venturing alone into the presence of that nobleman," observed Miss Morton, the tears streaming down her cheeks, as she smarted under the indignity which she had experienced at the hands of the two ladies. "What could they mean?—why did they regard me so intently?—what did they take me for?"

"Tranquillise yourself, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace, never at a loss for expedients to explain away a difficulty, and by no means desirous that Camilla should be shocked by the late proceeding, whence unpleasant suspicions might be engendered in the mind of the artless girl: "I can satisfy you on every point. Those two young ladies were his lordship's cousins—and the younger, who insulted you, is the one owing me the money. Catching a glimpse of my face in the coach, she suspected your errand; and that was the reason of her insolent conduct."

Camilla was immediately relieved by this explanation, composed of a tissue of falsehoods though it were: for the milliner had perfectly well recognised the daughters of Mr. Clarendon, and had taken very good care that Octavia should not see *her*.

The hackney-coach drove rapidly on towards Pall Mall, Mrs. Brace having no more visits to make nor commissions for Miss Morton to execute on the present occasion.

CHAPTER LX.

THE SURGEON.

Our readers will not have forgotten a certain Mr. Thurston, who figured in the opening chapters of our narrative. This medical gentleman, having not only accumulated money by unwearied application to his business and by habits of the strictest parsimony, but having also received the munificent sum of ten thousand pounds as a recompense for taking charge of the Princess Sophia's child, removed from the Edgeware Road into the fashionable district of May Fair.

The house which he thus took was large and of handsome appearance: it stood at the corner of a long paved alley forming the entrance to a mews, and whence a door communicated with the yard at the back of his premises. The interior of the dwelling he furnished in a costly style, well knowing how much the world is in the habit of judging a medical man's talents by his pecuniary prosperity and the style in which he lives. In this instance, therefore, neither Mr. Thurston nor his niggard wife spared their gold in embellishing their new abode: for it was a matter of calculation that the more they thus laid out, the greater would become the professional practice and the larger the returns of revenue.

The infant, who had been entrusted to the care of these people, and whom they had adopted as their own son under the name of Godfrey Thurston, throve admirably. The greatest attention was bestowed upon the child—and the surgeon's wife soon learnt to love it; while her husband, who was a shrewd and far-seeing man, often thought within himself that the existence of this proof of some high-born lady's frailty would some day or another yield him a richer harvest than even the ten thousand pounds which he had already reaped.

It was only on the very morning of those incidents which we have detailed in the preceding chapter, that the brass plate, with Mr. Thurston's name and profession engraved thereon, had been duly fixed upon the front-door of the new house in May Fair.

In the afternoon, a tall handsome-looking gentleman, enveloped in a cloak lined with sables, was walking, not exactly in a leisurely, but rather in an abstracted and mournful mood, along the street, —when he suddenly caught sight of the brass-plate. The neighbourhood was so familiar to him, that he was instantly aware of this being a new professional arrival in the district: besides, the exterior of the house had just been repaired and improved, and he also remembered that it was for some time to let until within a week or two past; so that all doubt was removed from his mind as to Mr. Thurston being a very recent settler in that fashionable colony.

Struck by some idea, which rapidly gained an influence upon him, he fixed his eyes for a few moments on the brass-plate—then walked on a few paces—then looked back again at the surgeon's abode—and then pursued his way, but with every evidence of indecision and hesitation in his manner. He was wrestling with the thought that had flashed to his mind, and which prompted him on the one hand to adopt a course whence shame and a deep sense of humiliation deterred him on the other.

At length, before he had gained the end of the street, he turned with the decision of a man who has abruptly resolved on taking a particular step, although a disagreeable one;—and, retracing his path to the surgeon's house, he knocked at the door.

A domestic in a handsome livery immediately answered the summons, and inquired the visitor's name so that he might learn whether he were a friend of the family or a patient, and might show him into the drawing-room or the surgery-parlour accordingly.

"I wish to consult your master professionally," was the reply, but unaccompanied with the announcement of any name.

The domestic led the way through a fine marble hall, to a carpetted passage communicating with the surgery-parlour, which joined the surgery itself, both being at the back part of the house. The parlour was a small but elegantly furnished room, having double doors alike at the entrance from the passage, and also on the side opening into the surgery—so that nothing which transpired within those four walls could be heard without. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate; and Mr. Thurston rose from a table where he had been engaged in writing, when the visitor was conducted into his presence.

"Your name, sir!" said Mr. Thurston, preparing to inscribe in a new book the appellation of his first patient at the new abode.

"It were a ridiculous affectation to conceal it," was the answer; "because I live at no very great distance, and because my rank would be certain to render you acquainted with my person in a short time. Nevertheless, it is in the strictest confidence, and relying on your honour, that I have come to consult you upon an important—an afflicting—a most delicate matter. I am the Earl of Desborough."

Mr. Thurston wrote down the name in his book and then said, "Your lordship may trust me. I have no interest in betraying the confidence thus reposed in me—but every possible reason to sustain it. Your lordship may likewise speak fearlessly: not a word uttered in this room can be heard without."

"I perceive that you have only recently settled in this neighbourhood," observed the nobleman; "and the recommendations of an influential friend may not prove a mean auxiliary to your own professional abilities. Those recommendations shall you have from me—that friend will I become."

"I most sincerely thank your lordship," said Mr. Thurston: "but even without these kind—these generous promises, I should not the less be faithful to any confidence which you may repose in me."

"Lady Desborough and myself have our regular family physician," continued the Earl: "but it happens that our surgeon has lately quitted the metropolis. Under these circumstances, therefore, you shall henceforth supply his place. Do not however think, Mr. Thurston," he added emphatically, "that I am saying all this merely with a view to bind you to my interests or appeal to a vulgar mercenary feeling. Such is not my intention: I am incapable of thus insulting you. But I wish you to understand that I have resolved to consult you in a certain matter—to entrust you with my sad secret—and to place the utmost reliance upon you, because we have hitherto been total strangers to each other—because you come into a new neighbourhood where some trifling amount of patronage may be useful—and because——"

"Because you believe that under any circumstances, I am more likely to keep your lordship's secret than an established practitioner who wastes half his time in idle chit-chat with those families at whose houses he is on an intimate footing. This is your lordship's view," added Mr. Thurston, in a decisive tone;—"and it is a correct one. I am not offended—I thank your lordship for that promise of patronage which I cordially accept—and every way will I prove myself worthy of your lordship's favour and countenance."

"I am glad that you have put the matter thus frankly upon its proper basis," said the Earl: then drawing forth from his purse a bank-note for five hundred pounds, he added, "This is your retaining fee."

Mr. Thurston bowed his thanks, and placed himself in an attitude of deep attention.

"I must inform you, sir," resumed the Earl, his manner suddenly becoming painfully embarrassed, "that I approach with the deepest humiliation—with the acutest sense of shame—the subject of my visit. Married for some years to a lady of extraordinary beauty and of the strictest virtue, but whose temperament is naturally of an ardent, glowing, and impassionate nature—I——But just heaven! how can I induce my tongue to frame the confession——"

And, suddenly starting from the seat which he had taken on entering the room, the Earl began to pace to and fro in the wildest agitation.

Mr. Thurston said nothing: he was not intimate enough with the nobleman to venture upon words of consolation, although he more than half suspected the nature of the secret which was about to be revealed to him.

Suddenly checking his frantic walk up and down the surgery-parlour, the Earl laid his right hand heavily upon the surgeon's shoulder—and bending his head until his lips nearly touched Thurston's ears, he said in a thick, hoarse, and low voice, "Five thousand pounds are yours if you can give

me any hope: for I—wretch that I am—Oh! do not look up at me as I speak——I am——"

And the remaining word, which proclaimed the fatal secret and confirmed the medical man's previous suspicion, was conveyed in the lowest audible whisper.

"Now you are acquainted with my misery—and my heart is already easier," said the nobleman, flinging himself once more on the seat which he had ere now quitted.

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"Then there is no hope, Mr. Thurston?" said the Earl, after a long private conference; and he spoke in a voice which betrayed how deeply he was moved.

"None, my lord," was the emphatic answer. "It would be downright robbery to take a shilling from you for such a purpose. Besides, your lordship has already remunerated me far too handsomely."

"Say not a word upon that subject," returned the nobleman. "My secret——"

"Is the same as if it had never been confided to me," rejoined Mr. Thurston.

"I thank you—sincerely thank you," said the Earl;—and pressing the surgeon's hand with convulsive violence, the unfortunate nobleman took his departure.

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It was about nine o'clock in the evening, and Mr. Thurston was alone in the surgery, having purposely dismissed his assistant, although there were several medicines to compound and send out—for the first day of the professional gentleman's career at the West End, had been a busy and a lucrative one.

The surgery had three doors: one communicated with the parlour where he had received the Earl of Desborough, and which was intended for the reception of persons calling to consult him: the second opened into the yard at the back of the building;—and the third communicated with an apartment of which we shall have to speak more in a future chapter. But these details, trivial as they may now appear, must be borne in mind.

Presently a bell in the surgery rang.

Mr. Thurston opened the door leading into the yard—and, passing out, he unfastened the gate communicating with the stables before alluded to.

A man immediately entered the premises, and Thurston conducted him, without saying a word, into the surgery, closing the door carefully behind him.

The individual whom he had thus admitted into his *sanctum*, was a short, strong-built, ill-looking fellow, with a repulsive countenance, and a sinister leer in the small reptile-like eyes which did one harm to meet their gaze. He was clothed in a coarse, rough, and negligent manner—but not through poverty: for the villain's ill-gotten gains were sufficient in the course of a month to keep an entire family in a respectable style for a whole year.

This man was Miles the Buzgloak.

"Well, sir," he said, as soon as the surgeon had closed the door, "you see I'm punctiwal to the appintment which you was kind enow to give me. So you've got into your new house—eh? Well, I only hope your business will increase accordingly—and then I shall have all the more of your paytronage."

"I did not send for you here to bestow your conversation upon me," exclaimed Mr. Thurston, sharply. "You are well aware what I require: can you manage it for me soon and secretly?"

"As for secrecy," responded Miles, "your honour knows that it's the wery fust principle of our business: and as for doing it soon, I can promise the thing for next Monday night, and no mistake whatsoever."

"Ah! next Monday night!" ejaculated the surgeon, a thought striking him. "Yes—I remember—it was said in this morning's paper that next Monday is the day fixed——But you mean me to have one of *them*, eh?"

"You can't have a better, sir," responded the man. "The young 'un will suit your book to a nicety."

"Well—be it so. And if any obstacle should arise in that quarter——"

"Then I must get you another—that's all!" answered the Buzgloak. "But it ain't likely: so if you'll be prepared next Monday night to receive me and my partner Dick the Tramper, who's as fine a fellow as any under the sun—'specially at this here sort of work——"

"I have no doubt of his merits whatsoever," interrupted Mr. Thurston, laconically. "At midnight—as near that hour as possible—I shall expect you. At all events, I shall remain in the surgery until you ring the bell of the gate opening from the mews. If you do not come by two in the morning, I shall conclude it is a failure in that quarter——"

"Make your mind easy, sir," exclaimed the Buzgloak, with a significant leer. "At twelve o'clock, or thereabouts, you'll hear the bell a-tinkling, snre enow. And having got so far, we'll just settle about the price—and then I'll take my walyable carcase off—'cos I've got another appintment on some business for this evening."

"Name your own terms—and I can easily say whether I agree to them, or not," observed the medical gentleman.

"Well—forty shiners won't hurt you," said Miles, fixing his serpent eyes upon Thurston to see how the price named was relished.

"No—'tis ten too much," was the answer.

"Come—we'll split the difference, and have no more bother about it," exclaimed the Buzgloak. "Thirty-five—cash on delivery—them's the terms; and on any others Mr. Miles respectfully declines doing business, as the ready-money tradesmen puts on their circulars."

"Be it so," said the surgeon. "At twelve, then, next Monday night, I shall expect you."

"There or thereabouts," responded the Buzgloak. "I know you'll be well satisfied with the result; and the bargain is entirely your'n. It's as cheap as dirt, considering the risk's transportation for life. But poor men like me must live any how——"

"And I don't suppose you are very particular in what way it is," interrupted the medical man, suffering his countenance to relax into a smile. "But we have settled everything—and——"

"And I'll bundle," added Miles.

The man accordingly took his departure, Mr. Thurston conducting him out by the back door.

On leaving the abode of the medical gentleman, Miles the Buzgloak proceeded rapidly towards Westminster; and, passing round the Abbey cemetery, he struck into the maze of vile and crowded streets lying in the immediate vicinity of that venerable pile. In spite of the frosty chill of the weather, half-naked women were seen standing at the open doors of the wretched houses,—the light from the windows flickering dimly upon their persons, and revealing countenances either bloated or emaciated with dissipation: while their language, as they discoursed across the thoroughfares with each other, bore terrible and unequivocal evidence to their utter depravity and boundless prodigacy.

From many of the dwellings came the noise of uproarious revelry and the boisterous sounds of drunken orgies,—mingled with the shrieks of some unfortunate female whom a paramour was treating with ruffian brutality, and the shrill voice of some querulous wife responding in bitter taunts to the coarse and gruff upbraidings of a worthless husband. Around the doors of the low public-houses were congregated loathsome wretches in female shape, chattering or disputing in loud tones — insulting any respectable person who might chance to pass that way—and making the whole neighbourhood ring with their vociferations of delight, when some flash fellow or fancy man accosted them with an offer to stand treat for gin. Now and then a poor mechanic out of work, and whom dire penury had forced to take up his abode in that horrible district, would creep shivering and miserable along the street to the house in which he occupied a wretched attic, and where he knew that a wife was giving a withered breast to a poor frail infant, and where starving children were crying piteously for the bread which he had not succeeded in obtaining throughout a long day's anxious and heart-breaking quest for honest employment. Now and then, too, some scantily clad and emaciated woman would

drag herself along through that morass of human reptiles, back to the cold and naked lodging where she had left a loved husband lying sick on a bundle of rags or a heap of straw, and famished little ones huddling together to keep themselves warm, while the poor father endeavoured to cheer his wretched offspring with the hope that their mother would be sure to bring them bread — a hope which in a few minutes was to experience so dire a disappointment!

For, oh! honest poverty and unblushing vice are always to be found in the same districts—always inhabit the same neighbourhoods: because a bad reputation cheapens lodgings in those quarters, and the upright poor are driven by an imperious and stern necessity to seek the advantages which inveterate demoralization has thus procured. And it is in this manner that the honest poverty ends by being drawn into the vortex of corruption and absorbed in the mass of profligacy and crime: it is thus that the poor artizan is led to steal sooner than behold his children starve;—it is thus that his wife is drawn into the loathsome circle whose centre is the gin-shop, where she imbibes the fire-water that drowns her cares and her better feelings at one and the same time;—it is thus, too, that the fair young daughter of these lost parents goes forth into the street to stretch out her hand to implore alms, as if she were holding it out to God, — when it is caught by some licentious rake or hoary voluptuary, who drops gold into the palm that only hoped to feel the touch of pence—and then another virtuous soul is lost, and another member added to the eighty thousand daughters of crime who crowd the finest thoroughfares and the most wretched alleys in the richest city of the universe!

But all this time, away rolls the portly Bishop in his splendid equipage, dreaming of his thirty thousand a-year and the fat livings which he has in his gift;—away flies the superb carriage containing the peer whose enormous income is made up of the flesh and blood of hundreds of starving labourers upon his vast estates;—away goes the chariot, in which patrician beauty lolls so languishingly, not thinking that the poor girl who made the satin dress that she wears, was with the same needle and thread sewing her own winding-sheet;—away passes the sumptuous barouche, bearing to some banquet the wealthy manufacturer who has just been voting in the House of Commons some measure calculated to rivet the iron oppression which already goads his slaves to desperation: away glides the brilliant equipage, on the downy cushion of which slumbers in a dreamy listlessness the coal-mine owner of countless riches, all produced by a sweat as agonising as that which streamed from the Saviour's pores on the Mount of Olives!—away flies the state coach of Royalty to the Opera which fills the pockets of foreigners with gold, while the votaries of the national drama are pining in debtors' prisons or preparing to visit the Bankruptcy Court on the morrow;—away, away they all go—those magnificent equipages, with their splendid steeds, and their glancing lamps, and their pampered menials,—away, away, spurning that ground to which the poor are crushed, and throwing up clouds of that dust which the famished slaves of toil are compelled to lick!

But to return to our tale.

Miles the Buzgloak pursued his path amidst the pestilential streets which lie behind the Abbey; and at length he entered a low public-house, or flash ken, known by the sign of the Jolly Prize-fighters. Nodding familiarly to the landlord as he passed the bar, he entered the tap-room, in which there was only one person seated at the moment he crossed the threshold.

That person was Dick the Tramper,—a tall, athletic, stoutly-built man, with a shock of fiery red hair, a large round face to match, and bushy whiskers of the same hue.

"Well, Miles—is it all right?" demanded this individual, as his friend threw himself on the same bench near the fire.

"All right," responded the Buzgloak. "The saw-bones Thurston will give thirty-five shiners—and I closed with him."

"That's just what we said we should get by asking forty," observed the Tramper. "Well, I han't been idle either," he continued, in the husky voice that was habitual with him. "I've taken a complete survey of the premises I spoke to you about; and it's easy enow to get in by the area; for it's the on'y house in the square that hasn't got bars at the kitchen winder."

"So far, so good," said Miles. "But what about Joe Warren?"

"Oh! he'll jine in with us," answered Dick the Tramper. "He says he's quite sick of laying hid down yonder; and he'll make one in the affair, if it's on'y to keep his-self in practice. He'll meet us at a certain part of the square which we've agreed upon at half-past twelve precise."

"That's good again!" cried the Buzgloak. "I'm glad the Magsman's in it: nothink never fails that he undertakes. But where's the tools?"

"Jemmy—centre-bit—wrench—skeleton-keys—and pistols, all stowed away safe," responded the Tramper, clapping his hands upon the capacious pockets of his rough coat.

"All right," said Miles, with an approving nod of the head. "Well, we'll start ten minutes arter midnight, eh?—and in the meantime we've got half-an-hour to smoke a clay and drink a pot or so."

"With all my heart," returned the Tramper.

And the two villains set to work to enjoy themselves accordingly.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE ROYAL GUEST.

We must now return to the Earl of Desborough, whom we left at the moment when he quitted Mr. Thurston's house in May Fair.

Summoning all his fortitude to his aid, after the crushing assurance which he had received to the effect that his last and only hope was fruitless, the nobleman returned home — shut himself up in his private apartment—and gave way to a long and painful meditation.

We cannot possibly endeavour to penetrate his thoughts: but that they were of the most harrowing description, might be inferred from his occasional outbursts of passionate grief—the superhuman efforts he made to subdue the fearful excitement which thus maddened him at intervals—the anguish with which he from time to time dashed his hands

against his high and noble forehead—the despair to which he abandoned himself—and the frequency with which he exclaimed aloud, "Yes—either suicide or that *other* dread alternative! My God! my God! have compassion on me!"

Once he seated himself at his desk and commenced a long letter which he addressed to his wife, and in which he explained the motives that led him to resolve upon self-destruction. While thus engaged, he experienced an unnatural calmness — amounting almost to that joy which animates the desperate man who has resolved upon escaping from the miseries of life by the avenue of suicide;—and a smile of satisfaction stole over his countenance, as he folded, sealed, and directed the letter. Then he rose from his seat—took his pistols from the case—charged and primed them.

Yes—he had resolved upon self-destruction!

But even at the very instant when he was about to place the muzzle of one of the fatal weapons in his mouth, the idea flashed to his mind that he would dishonour his name, and by reflection dishonour his wife also, were he to accomplish his terrible purpose: for no one would believe that insanity had driven him to the consummation of such a deed. And that first idea engendered a thousand others, which swept through his brain in ghastly and appalling array,—the Coroner's inquest—the probability that the Countess might in the first moment of her terror, exhibit his letter to some friend, or faint on reading it, and thus afford others an opportunity of reading it also—the chance that Thurston might come forward, as a matter of public duty, to bear evidence respecting the real facts which had prompted the suicidal deed—then the verdict of *felo de se*—the denial of Christian prayers—the disgrace which would survive him, and which would in a measure cling to his widow, especially if the fatal cause of his suicide should transpire,—all these reflections passed through his mind with the rapidity of a hurricane.

Shuddering at the idea of self-destruction which he had dared to harbour, and which for a short space he had contemplated so calmly,—shocked to the very soul at the madness to which he had yielded,—the wretched Earl restored his pistols to their case, and threw into the fire the letter which he had addressed to his wife.

Then, somewhat relieved, he again paced the room;—and at last he ejaculated in accents of despair, "Yes—it must be that *other* alternative! There is no help for it——My God! my God!"

Having thus made up his mind to the adoption of a certain plan which, though cruelly revolting and abhorrent to his mind, was, notwithstanding, far less terrible than the idea of suicide, the Earl of Desborough composed his countenance—arranged his dress—ordered his carriage—and repaired direct to Carlton House.

It was about three in the afternoon when the nobleman reached the princely dwelling; and he was immediately ushered into the presence of his Royal Highness, who happened to be alone and disengaged at the time.

At first the heir-apparent was somewhat confused when the Earl's name was announced: for he knew that Mrs. Brace was to have seen the Countess in the morning,—and it instantly struck him that she might have managed her business so clumsily as to compromise himself — and that her ladyship had complained to her husband, who was now come to demand explanations of the indignity offered to his wife. But the affable tone and the manner of dignified respect with which Lord Desborough accosted the Prince, speedily dissipated those apprehensions; and his Royal Highness received the noble visitor with a cordiality enhanced by the relief that his feelings had just experienced.

After the usual compliments had been exchanged and a few observations passed on the leading topics of the day, the Earl of Desborough, drawing his chair closer to that on which the heir-apparent was lounging, said in a subdued and serious tone, "I am about to take an exceeding liberty with your Royal Highness: but I humbly hope that my motives will be rightly understood. Have I permission to explain myself farther?"

"Most assuredly, my esteemed friend," exclaimed the Prince, wondering to what point this mysterious preface was to lead, but confident that it had no connexion with the designs which he had formed and the intrigues he had set on foot in regard to the beautiful Countess. "You cannot, I am well aware, have anything in view which is inconsistent with my interests: for your lordship invariably votes on the right side," added the Prince of Wales, who, be it recollected, patronised the Whig party, to which the Earl belonged.

"I thank your Royal Highness for this gracious permission to explain myself," said the nobleman; "and I shall proceed frankly and candidly to state the object of my visit. The indelicate publicity which the Pitt Cabinet has given to the pecuniary affairs of your Royal Highness, has both grieved and incensed me. It nevertheless ceases to be a mere rumour or surmise that your Royal Highness is somewhat annoyed by certain liabilities at the present moment; and as some weeks must elapse ere the House of Commons can possibly come to a vote upon the propositions submitted to it the other day in respect to those embarrassments, I have ventured to seek this interview with your Royal Highness for the purpose of stating that I have at the moment a surplus of twenty thousand pounds in my bankers' hands. If your Royal Highness will condescend to take charge of that amount till the end of the year——"

"My dear friend," interrupted the Prince, his countenance lighting up with joy, as he seized the Earl's hands and wrung them both with cordial warmth,—"I appreciate all the generosity and delicacy of this proceeding on your part; and I accept with unfeigned gratitude the noble offer which you have made me."

"In that case," said the Earl, "if your Royal Highness would condescend to accept such poor hospitality as I may be enabled this evening to offer——"

"Again I express my thanks," interrupted the Prince, delighted at the prospect of a twofold pleasure: namely, of touching twenty thousand pounds on the one hand, and of passing a few hours in company with the charming Eleanor on the other. "If it be agreeable to your lordship and your amiable Countess, I will take dinner with you this evening. But pray let us enjoy a friendly privacy——"

"It is precisely this that I intended to propose," said the Earl. "Her ladyship will feel honoured by the presence of your Royal Highness," he added, his voice becoming slightly tremulous and the colour deepening somewhat on his cheeks: but recovering

his composure so speedily that his transient emotion was not observed by the Prince, he added, "At eight o'clock we shall expect your Royal Highness."

"I shall be punctual," responded the heir-apparent;—and the Earl took his leave, in order to visit his bankers.

It was about half-past four in the afternoon when the nobleman returned to his mansion in Berkeley Square; and, having ascertained that the Countess was alone in the drawing-room which she usually occupied in the winter season, he proceeded straight to that apartment.

"My dearest Eleanor," he said, rendering his voice as kind and his manner as cordial as he possibly could, "I have had occasion to call just now upon his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales——"

Lady Desborough started; and it was only by a strong effort that she suppressed the ejaculation which rose to her lips.

"And his Royal Highness," continued the Earl, who at the instant let his handkerchief fall and stooped to pick it up—so that Eleanor was relieved by the certainty that her emotion had escaped his observation,—"and his Royal Highness will condescend to dine with us this evening. He has a little business to transact with me, of a pecuniary nature; and therefore his visit is strictly private—and he wishes to be alone with us, quite in a friendly way. The business to which I have alluded, will not occupy many minutes and can be transacted when we are over our wine together. I hope that the arrangement thus made will not interfere with any engagement previously made by you."

"I had no engagement for this evening," answered the Countess, now more than ever convinced that her husband was altogether ignorant of what had passed between herself and the Duchess of Devonshire on the preceding day, and that he was likewise unaware of the feeling which the Prince entertained towards her: or else, she was assured, he would not have invited his Royal Highness to the house.

"I need scarcely ask you to give such instructions, Eleanor," resumed the Earl, "that the entertainment may be worthy of the illustrious guest who is to honour us with his presence: nor is it needful for me to intimate my desire that, although the banquet be of the most private character, it will become us to appear in full dress."

"I should have anticipated your wishes in those respects, Francis," said the Countess, her heart fluttering like an imprisoned bird that is frightened in its cage, and the colour coming and going on her cheeks a dozen times in a minute.

The Earl then retired, and Eleanor, not daring to trust herself alone with her reflections, rang the bell and ordered the house-steward to wait upon her. That functionary soon made his appearance; and the Countess issued the necessary orders for the banquet. There were but three hours left for the preparations: but money and many servants can accomplish marvels; and her ladyship felt assured that the entertainment would be a magnificent one.

Having instructed the house-steward, Eleanor proceeded to her own chamber, where she issued the requisite commands to her two lady's-maids respecting her toilette;—but when this was done, she found that she had still a couple of hours to while away. She accordingly ordered the carriage, and paid a visit to her friend the Duchess of Devonshire, whom she confidentially acquainted with the circumstance that his Royal Highness was to dine at Desborough House in the evening. The conversation, therefore, dwelt entirely upon this subject; and as a demirep is invariably anxious to make her beautiful acquaintances or companions as bad as herself, the Duchess said everything she could to inflame the imagination of Eleanor in respect to the Prince: so that when the Countess returned home to dress for dinner, her heart palpitated and her bosom heaved with pleasure at the thought of the delightful evening which she was to pass.

Precisely at eight o'clock his Royal Highness made his appearance, and was conducted to the drawing-room, where he was received by the Earl and Countess of Desborough.

Eleanor was gloriously handsome. The grave bashfulness which her nobly-formed countenance wore, imparted a queen-like air to her whole appearance, and contrasted charmingly with the radiance which the diamonds on her raven hair and the lustre of her splendid black eyes diffused around her. She seemed a magnificent vision too perfect for human beauty—a houri of Mahommed's paradise, invested with all the supernal fascination of that elysian sphere.

And, in spite of herself—in spite of all the command which, prompted by her woman's pride and her natural virtue, she had resolved to exercise over her feelings,—in spite, we say, of the immense efforts which she had made to counteract, or rather to subdue, the influence of that insidious language which the Duchess of Devonshire had poured into her ears,—her bright eyes grew brighter beneath the impassioned gaze which the Prince rivetted upon her—and her hand trembled in his own, as he took it with apparent respect, but in reality pressed it gently—and the half-revealed bosom to which his looks then wandered and where they settled gloatingly, heaved to the sigh of pleasure which she could not control.

She remembered not the insolent threat to which the royal voluptuary had dared give utterance on leaving her the last time she had seen him: she thought only that he was the strikingly handsome man the Duchess of Devonshire had loved to paint him in glowing terms; and the consciousness that she was blushing made her blush all the more deeply—while the flood of light that poured into her swimming eyes dazzled and almost bewildered the Prince as he met the glance which flashed upon him from those brilliant orbs.

All these feelings—and emotions—and variations of countenance, which would occupy a whole chapter in order to detail them fully, passed during the few seconds that his Royal Highness held the fair soft hand of that charming lady in his own: then, as she resumed her seat upon the sofa whence she had risen to welcome him, he placed himself by her side, and began to converse in that melodious yet manly voice which possessed so irresistible a sweetness for the fair sex.

Several minutes elapsed ere the Countess could so far compose her thoughts and regain her self-possession as to take part in the discourse, which her husband however sustained with all the spirit of a fine intellect and an elegant taste; and in a short time a domestic entered to announce that dinner was served up.

The Prince gave his arm to Lady Desborough; and as they descended the stairs she felt that he pressed that arm gently with his own—but not in a manner which could have given offence, or been interpreted otherwise than as accidental, even if she had possessed courage and self-command enough at the moment to resent that silent evidence of his passion.

The table, although only laid with three covers, would have presented a superb spectacle to any one unaccustomed to such magnificence. It groaned beneath the burthen of the costliest gold plate, which shone brilliantly in the lustre of the chandelier suspended to the ceiling, and the light of which was reflected in numerous mirrors.

Amidst that glorious flood of radiancy, the handsome Eleanor seemed a goddess in her own Olympian sphere of light;—and so dazzled was the Prince by her transcendent charms, that, epicure as he was, he had scarcely any appetite for the variety of delicacies now served up.

The Earl appeared to be in excellent spirits; and even when his Royal Highness, carried away by the enthusiasm of his feelings, looked and spoke more tenderly with regard to the Countess than a jealous husband would have admired,—and when she, influenced by the same irresistible emotions, gave answers in a voice of silver tremulousness and blushed beneath the rapturous glances thrown upon her,—the nobleman continued to discourse with an increased gaiety—as if, beholding nothing amiss, he abandoned himself to the pleasure of the evening.

The various courses were disposed of—and at length the dessert was placed upon the table. Shortly afterwards the Countess rose to withdraw; and the Prince hastened to open the door for her, no servants being then in the apartment.

She bowed in acknowledgment of this honour; and as she passed out of the room, with that graceful carriage of the arching neck and sloping shoulders for which she was so eminently distinguished, the Prince said in a low and hurried whisper, "Angelic being! I adore you!"

Then, as she crossed the threshold, he beheld the rich blood mantling up over that neck and those shoulders; and he returned to his seat with the inward conviction that he had already gone far towards the accomplishment of a complete triumph over her.

"Your position is a most enviable one, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness to the Earl of Desborough, as the claret jug passed between them; "you assuredly possess as your wife the handsomest and most amiable lady in England."

"Yes—Eleanor is indeed all that is most fascinating and adorable in female shape," returned the nobleman. "But, with the permission of your Royal Highness, we will now terminate that little transaction——"

"If you please, Desborough," answered the Prince. "I really know not how to express my gratitude for this most unexpected and generous act on your part. But whenever the time may come that this hand of mine shall be enabled to affix a signature to a document in order to make it law, your earldom shall be changed into a marquisate, which is not far removed from the dukedom that shall speedily follow after."

"Your Royal Highness will only afflict me by the promise of reward," said the nobleman.

"I am aware that the deed is one of pure friendship on your part," hastily returned the Prince: "nevertheless, I should be wanting in gratitude, did I not express my inclination, although at present utterly deficient in the power, to make a suitable acknowledgment of the great service you are rendering me."

While the heir-apparent was thus delivering himself of frothy phrases, the hollowness of which was perfectly understood by the Earl, who well knew the selfishness of his royal guest,—twenty bank-notes for a thousand pounds each had been counted down on the table by the nobleman; and the Prince, amassing them all together as if they were a bundle of play-bills, thrust them into his waistcoat-pocket; then, drawing forth a letter, he tore off a piece of the back, and with a gold pencil-case scribbled an I.O.U., which he handed to the Earl.

Thus ended this little matter; and the Prince continued to enjoy his wine, the nobleman keeping him company glass for glass. The conversation turned upon a variety of topics: but every now and then his Royal Highness could not prevent himself from saying something complimentary in respect to Lady Desborough; on which occasions the Earl invariably directed the discourse as speedily as possible into another channel.

"I feel so comfortable and so entirely at home," said the Prince at last, "that I could almost wish I was to be your guest for a week, Desborough—instead of only for another hour," he added, looking at his watch. "In fact, I hate having to quit warm rooms and pass through the ordeal of a cold ride in a carriage."

"Your Royal Highness can easily avoid that ordeal," observed the nobleman. "A bed-chamber is at your service beneath my roof: and, indeed," he exclaimed hastily, "I should esteem myself highly honoured were your Royal Highness to condescend to sleep in my humble abode."

"Upon my honour," ejaculated the Prince, as the thought flashed to his memory that the Earl and Countess did not sleep together—a circumstance which we have already stated to be notorious,—"upon my honour, I am inclined to accept this invitation."

The nobleman walked to the window—drew aside the curtain—and looked forth upon the square.

"The night is bitterly cold," he said, returning to his seat: "there is a hard frost—and the pavement is quite white. It is enough to give any one his death, merely to pass from the front door into a carriage."

"I hate the cold, cried the Prince, shuddering at the idea of facing the bleak air. "Well, Desborough, I accept your invitation—and I will sleep here to-night."

The Earl accordingly rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered the summons, to direct the chamber-maids to prepare the best apartment, as his Royal Highness intended to pass the night at the mansion. The domestic bowed and retired; and shortly afterwards another lacquey came to announce that coffee was served in the drawing-room.

Thither the heir-apparent and the Earl proceeded. Eleanor was seated on the sofa: her cheeks were flushed—her eyes shone brilliantly—and there was an agitation, a feverish excitement in her manner which she could not altogether conceal, much less subdue. The truth was, she had already heard from the servants that his Royal Highness intended to sleep at the mansion; and although there was no-

thing surprising in the circumstance of her husband having given such an invitation, yet the fact that the Prince had accepted it—nay, she felt assured, must have thrown out some hint which elicited it—was too significant not to be understood by the lady.

Then—Oh! then, how violent was the struggle which had taken place between her virtue and her inclinations: how tumultuous was the agitation which filled her heart, as her physical and her moral nature warred together;—how dire was the conflict between the flesh and the spirit! There was a woman imploring heaven to keep her chaste—clasping her hands and beseeching her God to preserve her in the path of duty—exerting every energy to maintain her footing in the ways of rectitude,—but yielding—bending—succumbing beneath the weight of indomitable passions—burning with the fiercest desires! The battle was maddening—the strife was excruciating. Oh! how she prayed for strength—for succour: and yet her strength failed her fast—and succour came not. She resolved to retreat to her own chamber—to send by a servant an apology for her absence with a plea of indisposition: but scarcely had she thus determined, when voices on the landing without met her ears—and she had barely time to seat herself on the sofa before the Prince and her husband made their appearance.

No wonder, then, that her cheeks were flushed—that her eyes shone with a brilliancy that was wild and feverish: no wonder that her heart palpitated violently and she gave a sudden convulsive start, as the heir-apparent placed himself by her side upon the sofa.

And *he* noticed her emotions, but divined not the true cause: his licentious, profligate, and demoralised nature led him to mistake the results of that severe internal wrestling for the evidences of a passion as heated, as inflamed, and as longing as his own. The Earl, having thrown one rapid glance upon his wife, examined some new China ornaments which had that day been placed upon the mantel-piece: it was therefore clear to Eleanor that he either did not perceive anything strange in her appearance, or that if he did it engendered no unpleasant suspicion in his mind.

Relieved and consoled by the circumstance that her excitement had thus again escaped the observation of her husband,—and summoning all her fortitude to her aid,—the Countess of Desborough assumed a composure, almost verging to a gaiety, which she did not entirely feel; and in the endeavour to seem cheerful, contented, and free from any cause of annoyance or embarrassment, she over-played her part. The consequence was that her manner appeared so supremely happy—her discourse sparkled with such gems of wit and flashes of intellect—her laugh was so melodiously hearty—and her smiles were so enchantingly radiant, that it was impossible for her to prove more agreeable.

The coffee was handed round—the Prince and the Earl each took a small glass of exquisite *liqueur*—and the conversation was progressing in the same brilliant style as before, when his Royal Highness, in quoting a line of poetry, attributed it to the wrong author. Eleanor corrected him: but he declared that he was right. Thereupon the Earl, starting from his seat, volunteered to fetch from the library a volume which would set the matter at rest; and he left the room.

But scarcely had the door closed behind him, when the Prince, seizing the hands of the Countess, pressed them to his lips, covering them with kisses.

"Oh! you are determined to ruin me, body and soul!" murmured Eleanor, allowing her head to droop upon his shoulder, so that her hair mingled with his and her soft warm cheek lay against his own.

"Ruin you, my angel!" cried the Prince, throwing his arms about her neck and straining her to his bosom: "I would die to promote your happiness! O Eleanor—dearest Eleanor—I love—I adore you: drive me not to despair!"

And, unwinding his arms, he raised her head with his hands, and imprinted a thousand kisses upon her lips,—burning kisses which she returned—yes, she returned—for she was now borne headlong on the torrent of voluptuous feelings into which her fate appeared to plunge her.

"Dearest — dearest Eleanor!" whispered the Prince; "you cannot fail to suspect wherefore I have remained here to-night. Again, therefore, I say—do not drive me to despair. Murmur in my ears a single word—an instruction to guide me to your chamber——"

And once more he strained her to his breast: once more he covered her charming, blushing, burning countenance with kisses;—and, in the delirium of the moment—in the intoxication of ineffable feelings—in the whirl of all the tenderest emotions which woman's heart can know, the yielding Eleanor *did* murmur the few words of instruction which her daring companion craved.

Then, tearing herself from his embrace, she smoothed her hair and her dress, and strove to tranquillise her sensations and compose her features ere her husband returned to the room.

Fortunately on her account, several minutes yet elapsed before he made his appearance: otherwise he could not have failed to observe the thrilling excitement which possessed his wife, and whence she found it so difficult to recover.

Apologising for his prolonged absence on the ground that he could not immediately find the book which he sought, the Earl of Desborough opened the volume he carried in his hand; and the Prince of Wales was compelled to acknowledge that he was wrong in his opinion and that the Countess was right.

This point being settled, the conversation was pursued until near twelve, when Eleanor rose to withdraw. The Prince took her hand; and, as he pressed it warmly but rapidly, he darted upon her a glance so full of meaning that she was forced to turn away immediately in order to conceal the burning blush which that look called up to her features.

The moment the Countess had quitted the room, a deep and sudden sadness fell upon the Earl—a sadness so profound, so strange, so irresistible, that the heir-apparent could not help observing it. The nobleman complained that indisposition had thus abruptly seized on him; and, endeavouring to smile, he declared it to be nothing—a mere trifle—and already passing away. But that smile—oh! it was so ghastly — so death-like — so positively hideous, that the Prince was alarmed; and, imagining that the Earl was about to faint, he rushed towards the bell.

Lord Desborough started up—caught the hand of his Royal Highness just as it touched the bell-

rope—and exclaimed, "No—no—I am better now—I assure you that I am! But there are moments when this sudden indisposition, to which I am subject, seizes upon me with excruciating agonies."

The Earl immediately rallied; and the Prince was fully satisfied with the explanation which had been given. They remained conversing together for a few minutes longer; and then Lord Desborough in person conducted his Royal Highness to the chamber prepared for him.

The chandeliers were extinguished in the dining and drawing-rooms—one by one, but in quick succession, the domestics ascended to their rooms—one by one also the lights disappeared from the windows of their respective chambers; and in a short time a profound silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

The church-clocks were proclaiming the hour of one, when the door of the Prince's apartment was opened slowly and cautiously;—and his Royal Highness stole forth into the passage, where a lamp was burning.

But scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when an ejaculation of surprise fell upon his ears;—and, to his horror and dismay, he found himself face to face with the Magsman!

CHAPTER LXII.

THE PRINCE AND THE MAGSMAN.

Rooted to the spot—paralysed, as it were—transfixed by the varied feelings which the sudden apparition of this ruffian conjured up in his mind all in a moment,—the heir-apparent could not utter a word, but stood gazing in speechless terror and surprise on the hang-dog countenance which, once seen, could never be forgotten.

"Well, I'm blowed if this isn't the rummest lark I ever knew in my life!" said the Magsman at length; for, well aware that the Prince would not venture to alarm the house and give him into custody, he was as free and independent as possible.

"For heaven's sake, come this way!" whispered his Royal Highness, now recovering the powers of speech, and uttering these words in a voice of mingled entreaty and command.

The Magsman accordingly followed the Prince into the bed-chamber, the door of which his Royal Highness carefully closed.

Scarcely, however, had that door shut, when the Countess of Desborough came airily and lightly down the passage—but with trembling limbs, a countenance ghastly pale, and a bosom upheaved with the suspended breath. For she had left her own door ajar—she had heard that of the Prince open, in spite of the caution which he observed—then she had heard the ejaculation of surprise which had fallen from the Magsman's lips, but which her fancy, influenced by the sudden terror that seized upon it, tortured into an exclamation of rage—next came the sounds of whispering voices—and lastly the door of the heir-apparent's chamber closed again. She looked forth into the passage: no one was there. Her fears rose to an intolerable height. She felt convinced that her husband, suspecting the understanding into which the Prince had drawn her, had watched in the passage—had intercepted his Royal Highness as he was about to seek her apartment—and had followed him into his own chamber, either to cover him with reproaches, or perhaps for some more desperate purpose. For Eleanor had heard of duels fought across tables, by persons holding handkerchiefs between them so that there should be no flinching and no retreat without the imputation of cowardice: she had also read of injured husbands taking the law in their own hands in a very summary manner, and shooting without remorse those adventurous gallants who had either debauched their wives or endeavoured to seduce them;—and, knowing the high feelings and exalted sentiments which her husband entertained, she was struck with the appalling idea that he would not hesitate to wreak his vengeance on his treacherous guest, all Prince and heir-apparent though he were!

Quick as lightning did this train of reflections sweep across the mind of the unhappy lady, convulsing her whole form with anguish, blanching her cheeks, and suspending her very breath: and, under the influence of that fearful consternation, did she hurry along the passage—step noiselessly up to the door of the Prince's chamber—apply her ear to the key-hole—and listen with the attention of an awful interest to what was taking place within.

But her feelings, so tensely wrung—so excruciatingly tried, speedily experienced a boundless relief in one sense,—although only to undergo a painful transition into a state of ineffable wonderment, indignation, and deep humiliation.

Let us however describe the scene that took place in the chamber at the door of which the noble, elegant, and handsome Countess of Desborough was playing the part of eaves-dropper.

"What are you doing in this house?" demanded the Prince, after a long hesitation how he should address the ferocious ruffian who, leaning against the bed-post, surveyed him with cool defiance.

"I suppose I've just as much right to ask you the same question," was the insolent response: "seeing that it's no more your house than it is mine."

"Do you forget who I am, sirrah?" exclaimed the Prince, the words hissing through his set teeth—for he was quivering with a rage that was all the more furious because of its utter impotency.

"Well, I can't say that I do," answered the Magsman. "You're the heir to the throne—and a precious rum heir you are, too. But it seems that you forget who I am: and so I'll just tell you. My name's Joseph Warren—I don't *Esquire* myself, you see: better known by intimate friends as Joe the Magsman. My wife is that dear soul who now passes in the fine world as Mrs. Brace, and whom you've done me the honour to make your mistress. Yes—and I haven't the slightest doubt that she's your go-between—and pander—and procuress—and everything else good and agreeable. Lord bless ye! d'ye think I can't read the secret of that fine establishment she keeps, and all those pretty girls that she has about her. But why do you stand looking at me in that savage style? I'm only telling you the truth. By the bye, I must thank your Royal Highness for the five hundred guineas you sent me three or four weeks ago through my wife——"

"Wretch! will you make an end of this hideous

bantering?" cried the Prince, bewildered and enraged to a degree that amounted to positive anguish.

"You don't appear to have anything to say for yourself," returned the villain, in a jeering tone: "and therefore I must speak for you. It wouldn't be genteel on my part to treat your Royal Highness with contemptuous silence."

"Again I demand—what are you doing in this house?" exclaimed the Prince, heedless of the fellow's observations.

"And on my side I ask—what were you doing in that sneaking way in the passage?" retorted the Magsman. "But come,—let us be candid with each other. You are the Prince of all the rakes and demireps at the West End—and I'm the Prince of all the buzgloaks, prigs, cracksmen, and flash coves elsewhere. So we meet on equal ground, you see. Well, then—let's have no nonsense between us. I'm here to rob the house—and you were going to creep along the passage to some expectant fair one's bedchamber: as likely as not the lady of the mansion herself—for you're quite capable of it."

"My God! what shall I do with this wretch?" exclaimed the Prince, in a tone of despair. "Villain," he immediately afterwards exclaimed,—"you have escaped from Newgate—and one word will alarm the house and send you back to your old quarters."

"Quite true, Prince of Profligates," responded the Magsman: "but that *one* word you don't dare to utter."

"What do you require?—what can I do to persuade you to depart forthwith?" demanded the heir-apparent, goaded to desperation by the idea that the charming Eleanor was expecting him: for he little thought that she was so near at hand, and listening in horrified amazement and speechless indignation to every word that thus passed between himself and the Magsman.

"What do I require?—what can you do to persuade me to depart?" repeated the ruffian. "Why—I'll tell you in a very few words. I've two pals with me who're waiting very quietly down in the front kitchen till I go back to them after this little reconnoitre that I was taking of the house when I ran against you. Make it worth our while to bundle off at once—and I can assure you, we shall be much better satisfied to finger some hard cash than run a risk of being seen going out with a parcel containing plate and such like little matters."

"Then you have two companions with you?" said the Prince, exerting all his moral powers to master the rage, vexation, and bitter annoyance which this scene caused him to experience.

"Yes—and they'll agree to any bargain I make with you," replied the Magsman, who saw all along that he had the game in his own hands.

"Now, listen—one word will settle this affair," resumed his Royal Highness, in feverish haste. "Five hundred guineas shall be sent to you to-morrow at any place you choose to appoint——"

"That will do," interrupted the Magsman. "I know I can rely on your word—because you don't dare break it with me. One of my friends down stairs will call at Carlton House to-morrow at midday, and ask if there's any letter for Mr. Smith. He's a genteel chap—Dick the Tramper—and he'll dress up swell for the occasion."

"Let that be the understanding," said the Prince. "And now you will undertake to depart——"

"Yes—me and my two pals. I won't waste time by introducing them to you—although they'd be charmed to make your acquaintance. But we'll be off—and what's more, the people of the house shan't suspect to-morrow morning that the place has been entered during the night. It was fortunate that the kitchen window was left unfastened—and so there was no cutting out of panes of glass, or any need to use the jemmy. Good bye, illustrious Prince: and now you may be off to Lady Desborough's bed, if it was her chamber that you was going to."

With this coarse peroration, the volubility of which his Royal Highness did not dare interrupt, for fear of offending the Magsman and producing that disturbance in the house which he had been so anxious to avoid,—the formidable ruffian stole gently out of the apartment: but the slight creaking which the door made on being opened, drowned the noise of *another door* which closed at the same moment at the end of the passage.

His Royal Highness drank a deep draught of water to cool his parched throat, the instant that he found himself alone. He then sank into an armchair near the fire that was now smouldering in the grate, and endeavoured to compose his countenance and settle his thoughts.

By degrees he began to congratulate himself on having avoided a disturbance and exposure in the mansion—notwithstanding that this result had been accomplished at the expense of so much humiliation and by the endurance of such cutting insolence;—and, having succeeded in tranquillising his mind, he resolved to proceed to the chamber of the Countess.

Cautiously did he emerge a second time from his apartment—stealthily did he tread along the passage—and in a few moments he reached the door of the room where he hoped to reap a rich reward for the annoyances he had so recently experienced.

But that door was fastened. He knocked gently: there was no response. He knocked again: still all was silent. He listened: no one moved within. Could he have mistaken the chamber? Impossible! for it was the last in the passage, on the left hand. A third time he knocked: and now a light step was heard approaching that door. It was about to be opened!—he was already standing on the threshold of paradise! The blood boiled in his veins with the excitement of passion deeply stirred: his heart palpitated violently. Glorious recollections of all the transcendent charms of the Countess swept through his memory in a moment. She was coming—and he was about to be happy!

"Who is it?" demanded her soft and silvery voice—but, as the Prince fancied, somewhat abruptly.

"'Tis I, my angel—your adorer!" he whispered.

"Then I command your Royal Highness to retire to your own chamber," was the stern and imperious response.

And he heard her retreat with a rapid step from the door.

For a few instants he stood stupified—amazed—astounded: then all the indignation of his haughty soul and all the pride of his princely rank asserting their empire, he turned away—disdaining to implore a syllable of explanation.

At an early hour he rose from a sleepless couch, and immediately ordered his carriage. A few minutes afterwards the Earl of Desborough made his appearance, and begged his Royal Highness to re-

main and partake of the breakfast which was already served up. But the Prince declined in terms so positive as to be almost rude;—and it was even with a certain degree of coldness which he could not master, that he took a hasty leave of the nobleman.

The instant that they had thus separated, a glow of indiscribable pleasure suffused itself over the countenance of the Earl of Desborough; and hurrying to his own chamber, he threw himself on a seat, weeping for very joy!

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE CONDEMNED SERMON.—THE EXECUTION.

It was Sunday morning;—and the Chapel in Newgate prison afforded a scene of deep and dreadful interest.

The galleries, respectively allotted to the males and females, were filled with prisoners, who presented a somewhat more cleanly appearance than on the occasion of Mrs. Brace's visit to the establishment: for the threat which was invariably held out on the Sabbath, of stopping the roast-beef of those who did not wash for chapel, had produced the desired effect.

In the large circular pew in the middle of the place of worship, Martin and Ramsey were seated. Soper, armed with his keys, kept watch upon them: but this precaution was unnecessary—for escape was impossible!

Consistently with the barbarian cruelty which characterised all the proceedings of what was termed "justice," and suitable with all the law's demands and exigencies, in the time of that detestable monarch George III, the black coffins intended for the two criminals were placed at their feet, inside the enclosure.

The adjacent pews were filled with elegantly dressed ladies—some from the City, and others from the West End,—but all attracted thither to listen to the Condemned Sermon, and see the doomed men who were to be hanged on the following morning.

Oh! talk not of the vitiated taste and the morbid curiosity which influence the multitudes that flock to places of public execution: for if rags and tatters go thither, silks and satins were ever wont to repair to the Chapel of Newgate to hear the funeral exhortation of the Ordinary, until the proceeding amounted to a scandal and a shame which rang throughout Europe. Then the authorities interposed—and a salutary prohibition was the result.

But on the occasion of which we are writing,—in those "good old times" which the people's oppressors love to prate about,—the Sabbath preceding the fatal day of public strangulation, was invested with all possible horrors for the two condemned wretches, and with all possible entertainment for the well-dressed gentlemen and elegantly attired ladies who had been *fortunate* enough to obtain tickets of admission.

Separated from all the rest—rendered most painfully conspicuous—enclosed in that circular pew, Martin and Ramsey were enduring the damnable tortures of a moral Inquisition, preparatory to the infernal crowning catastrophe.

If they raised their eyes, they beheld a bigotted, dogmatic, and superstitious Ordinary, endeavouring to establish a reputation for pulpit eloquence at the expense of *their* feelings already so acutely wrung:—if they looked around them, they saw beauteous faces gazing intently upon them, and bright eyes watching every movement of their muscles with the keenest curiosity;—and if they glanced downward, their vision was appalled by those black objects of sinister shape which stood at their feet.

It was horrible—horrible!

And yet those two doomed men were expected to compose their thoughts to prayer, and fix their ideas only and wholly upon the eternity into which they were so soon to be hurried!

But—Almighty God! how was this possible? Turn whichever way they would, their eyes encountered something to recall their imaginations most painfully—most agonisingly to the affairs of this world, and to the beings who render it a scene of barbarism, wretchedness, and oppression.

Oh! would it not have been better far to allow those men, already hovering between two spheres—that of mortality and that of eternity,—would it not have been more humane, more just, more consistent with true religious feeling, to leave them each in his solitary cell, and thither send the minister of Christ to console—to sooth—to pray—and to promise!

Wherefore permit those curious spectators to flock thither on such an occasion?—why convert the temple of worship into a stage for the representation of a melodrama of thrilling interest?—why place the emblems of the grave at the feet of the doomed wretches?

Because all these proceedings were consistent with the despotic times and sanguinary laws of George III—that monarch who was made up of madness, bigotry, deception, and bloody-mindedness: because everything in that age was done with a view to strike terror into the public mind, and thereby check civilisation, freedom, and progress;—and because our legislators and rulers invariably support those systems of cruelty, barbarism, tyranny, superstition, and wrong, which the millions are enlightened enough to denounce, and humane enough to shudder at!

In a retired corner of the Chapel, George Woodfall—that young and interesting artist who has already been introduced to our readers—was seated. He was led thither by no sentiment of morbid curiosity: his nature was above such an ignominious feeling. But he had been sent by his griping old master—the greedy, avaricious picture-dealer—to study the countenance of Philip Ramsey, in order to transfer it to canvass at his leisure. For so much interest had attached itself to the trial of the forgers, and so highly had the press spoken of the handsome appearance and elegant manners of the younger convict, that Mr. Shrubsole felt assured of obtaining a speedy sale and a good price for a portrait of this individual.

The reverend Ordinary droned through a long and clumsily-composed sermon, by the details of which he had hoped to produce a thrilling effect upon his auditory: and if he could only succeed in wringing tears from the two condemned culprits—Oh! what a grand proof of his eloquence would that be—and what a telling circumstance to have reported in the newspapers of the following morning!

One or two of the elegant ladies who were assembled there, thought it necessary to squeeze out a few tears; and Mr. Soper pursed up his mouth and endeavoured to look as sentimental as possible.

In the gallery, amongst the male prisoners, were the Big Beggarman and Briggs, to whose case the Ordinary likewise alluded—exhorting them and other convicts to take warning from the dreadful spectacle presented to their view by the occupants of the circular enclosure. This advice did not however seem to produce any salutary effect: for the Big Beggarman, stooping his head, whispered some coarse remark to his friend Briggs, who responded in an equally irreverent manner.

The service was concluded: the prisoners, male and female, were marched back to their wards;—and the two doomed men were re-consigned each to his condemned cell. The congregation dispersed; and the Ordinary accepted an invitation to lunch with the governor of Newgate—well knowing that in addition to such substantial or cheering comforts as cold pigeon-pie, bottled stout, and cherry-brandy, he should receive the more frothy but scarcely less welcome compliments which his sermon was expressly fabricated to elicit.

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Damp, raw, and misty broke the fatal Monday morning; and immense crowds were collected in the Old Bailey and in every avenue leading thither.

At the debtors' door of Newgate stood the terrible machine—the huge platform, with its black beams towering high above the heads of the assembled masses.

The bell of St. Sepulchre, which had already begun to toll, appeared to have a gloomier sound than usual, as its iron tongue struck deep and solemn on the ear: more sombre than ever frowned the solid masonry of Newgate upon the gathered multitudes;—and the very air seemed to have acquired a more searching and penetrating chill.

Nevertheless, the crowds commenced their ribald jesting, practical jokes, and licentious conversation: for our precious rulers are either so besottedly igno-

rant or so wilfully criminal as to demoralise the people by means of these accursed exhibitions of public strangulation.

But suddenly a dead silence fell upon the vast mass of spectators; and all eyes were fixed, as if spell-bound, upon the ominous scaffold.

Slowly came forth the funeral procession from the debtors' door: first the Ordinary made his appearance, with open prayer-book in his hands, and reading the service for the dead;—close behind followed the governor of Newgate;—then Martin and Ramsey, both pinioned in the usual manner, ascended the steps of the platform, accompanied by the executioner;—and lastly, the Sheriffs issued from the gaol.

The countenances of the doomed men were ghastly pale: but their lineaments were convulsed with no hideous workings. Rigid, as if the cold hand of the Destroyer lay already upon them, were those features. No tears fell from their eyes: the appalling consternation which was upon them had frozen nature's relieving fountain at its very source. Their senses were enchained as if under the influence of a frightful dream. Stiffened with dread horror, they could scarcely drag their limbs up the steps to the sable platform, in the middle of which were marked the outlines of the trap-door that opened *downward* beneath the fatal cross-beam. Their brains were seared and their feelings were blasted as if with lightnings. There was a tingling in their ears as if evil spirits were whispering awful things: the incantation of a black despair was upon them. An awful terror had paralysed all their faculties: it was a fearful stupefaction, combined with a perfect consciousness of all that was passing—a species of night-mare which they could not shake off, and which held them dumb!

Placed beneath the fatal beam—there they stood transfixed, sustaining themselves on their legs by a kind of mechanical instinct, and not because they sought to meet their doom with firmness. The executioner fastened the ropes round their necks: and then, for the first time, they appeared to start from their automaton condition. For over the countenance of each did an indescribable expression of anguish pass: horror glared in their eyes—the spasmodic writhing which swept through their frames convulsed their features—and their ashy lips were suddenly compressed as if to keep down the cry of mortal agony that rose to the tips of their tongues.

But, in another moment, the white cotton caps were drawn over those countenances now really hideous — and the executioner, leaping down the steps, entered the vast wooden box which formed the pedestal to that ominous gibbet above.

The Ordinary continued the funeral service—the multitudes, still maintaining a profound silence, kept their looks rivetted on the scene of horrible interest and fearful attraction.

Down came the trap-door — down fell the two doomed men: but, Oh! their fall was suddenly stopped short by the ropes to which they hung;—and there they dangled in the air, dread spasms shooting through their frames—lightnings pouring up into their brain — their hands moving rapidly up and down with the convulsions of dying agony.

And as if the galvanism of that mortal anguish were suddenly wafted throughout the dense assemblage of spectators, a shudder swept over the entire mass; and, even with the most brutalised and degraded, it did them harm to contemplate this awful spectacle of public strangulation.

In a few minutes, however, this feeling and that impression appeared to have lost all their effect: for, so soon as the Ordinary, the governor of Newgate, the executioner, and the Sheriffs had re-entered the prison, the practical jokes, the obscene jests, the bonneting, and the larking began all over again—while hawkers bawled out, "The last Dying Speeches and Confessions of Martin and Ramsey!"

And these printed lies were eagerly caught up by those who had a halfpenny to give for them, although the purchasers well knew that no Dying Speeches had been made at all, and had read the Confessions in the newspapers of the preceding day. But then those narratives had a rough and rudely executed wood-cut of a scaffold at the top—and *this* was the main attraction.

At nine o'clock the bodies were cut down and conveyed into the gaol, where it was understood that the corpse of Martin would be interred at midnight; but the remains of Ramsey had been claimed by some friends who were desirous to bury them elsewhere.

The crowds dispersed—and all the public-houses in the neighbourhood were soon filled: the scaffold was rolled away into the press-yard of Newgate—the Ordinary and the Sheriffs sate down to an excellent breakfast with the governor—and thus ended the accursed scene.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE PORTRAIT AND THE DREAM

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of that day on which Martin and Ramsey were executed; and we again find Mrs. Brace seated alone in her elegantly furnished parlour. But a visitor was speedily announced: and this was the Prince of Wales.

"My dear Fanny," he said, flinging himself upon a seat as soon as he had removed his cloak,—"I have been anxious to see you for three or four days past: but I could not possibly find an opportunity. Octavia will however be here presently; and therefore I resolved to have half-an-hour's chat with you before her arrival."

"She believes, then, that you have just returned to town?" remarked Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"Yes: I longed to see the sweet girl again—and I wrote her a note this morning, stating that I came back to London last night, and that I hoped she would bless me with an interview here this evening. She is sure to keep the appointment," added his Royal Highness.

"And pray, have you ever thought how this amour is to end?" asked the milliner, who had latterly begun to reflect that if an explosion should take place in that respect, her own establishment would be ruined. "To tell you the truth," she continued, "I look upon it as far more serious than any other love-affair in which you were ever engaged—at least within my knowledge. For here is a young creature, tender and confiding, and who believes you to be plain Mr. Harley, with a country-seat somewhere, and living at an hotel when in town; and it must happen, sooner or later, that accident will reveal to her your real rank. Then, in the first feeling of anguish, she will betray all—everything ——"

"My dear Fanny," interrupted the Prince, "I know all that you would say; and your alarms are not without foundation. Within the last few days I have myself reflected very seriously on this matter. In the first flush of that ardent passion with which the dear girl inspired me, all other considerations were absorbed; but, awaking as if from a dream, I now perceive all the perils which are likely to ensue. To reveal myself to her, were impossible: to continue with the constant risk that she may discover who I am, is fraught with danger."

"And if this amour should lead to *other* consequences?" said Mrs. Brace: "if Octavia should find herself in the way to become a mother——"

"I know not how to act—I am bewildered!" exclaimed the Prince, in a tone of deep vexation. "But we will talk over this matter on a future occasion. It was relative to the Countess of Desborough that I wished to speak particularly to you now."

"And it was likewise concerning her ladyship that I was anxious to see you," said Mrs. Brace; "for I felt assured there was something wrong in that quarter."

"Ah! how could you possibly have formed such a conjecture?" demanded the Prince.

"Because, on the very day after I called upon her ladyship, and the particulars of which interview I sent you in a hastily written note on my return home, one of her servants came with an imperative command that my account should be sent to her ladyship without delay. So urgent was the message, that I instantaneously complied: and in the course of that very same afternoon the sum due to me was brought by the same domestic. At the bottom of the bill were these words:—'*The Countess of Desborough will not in future trouble Mrs. Brace to wait upon her as hitherto with the newest fashions.*' This intimation," added the milliner, "is not to be misunderstood: it is a withdrawal of her ladyship's custom from my house."

"I see it all!" exclaimed the Prince, a light breaking in upon him. "She must have overheard the conversation which took place between me and your wretched husband!"

"Conversation!—husband!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, starting and turning very pale.

"I will explain myself," said the Prince.

He then related all those adventures in connexion with his visit to Desborough House, which are already known to the reader—merely suppressing the fact that the Earl had lent him twenty thousand pounds. But he mentioned how his lordship had invited him to dinner—how Eleanor had promised to admit him to her chamber—how he had encountered the Magsman—and how her ladyship's door was afterwards fastened against him.

"And did you yield to the extortion of that villain?" inquired Mrs. Brace, deeply humiliated at the thought that her own husband should thus have insulted the Prince so grossly a second time.

"What could I do?" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "It was impossible for me to risk persecution and exposure at the hands of that man, who already knows too much concerning me," he continued; "and therefore the money was paid in the way he had stipulated. That the Countess must have left her chamber, listened at my door, and overheard everything which took place between me and that scoundrel, is very evident. Hence her refusal to keep her promise and admit me to her room: hence also the summary manner in which she has withdrawn her custom from you. For that ruffian, whom I will not call your husband, said enough to make her ladyship understand that you and I were very intimately connected, and that all you had said to her in the morning was entirely in my behalf."

"You have therefore abandoned all hopes in that quarter?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Far from it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Those burning kisses which I gave and which were returned with equal ardour—those delicious toyings and that voluptuous dalliance in which I revelled for a few moments, during her husband's absence from the room—the deep hold which this passion has taken of my heart—and a certain sentiment of pride prompting me to triumph over the coy and haughty beauty,—all these motives, my dear Fanny, prevent me from abandoning my designs regarding the lovely Countess. I am maddened by the contemplation of her image: my veins boil with the fervour of my desires. And her own nature is so warm—so impassioned—so glowing, that it must be paradise to repose in her arms. By heaven!" ejaculated the Prince, with almost a wild emphasis,—"she shall be mine, by fair means or foul."

"And is it for this purpose that you have sought my advice?" asked the milliner.

"Assuredly so," responded his Royal Highness. "Place all your powers of invention upon the rack—torture your imagination to the extreme—but fail not to devise some project which shall give that delicious creature to my arms."

"For the life of me, I can think of nothing!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "Unless, indeed——"

"Unless, what?" demanded the Prince, impatiently.

"Unless actual violence be resorted to—or some deeply laid stratagem," returned the milliner.

"Be it either—I hardly care which," added the impassioned George, "so long as we succeed. But I do not ask you to make up your mind at once: the matter is a serious one, and requires consideration."

"In the course of a day or two I will devise some project," said Mrs. Brace.

At this moment Harriet entered the room, to announce that Miss Clarendon had arrived.

The Prince sprang from his seat, and hastened to the apartment where the beauteous girl was waiting for him.

She flew into his arms; and tears of joy streamed down her blushing cheeks, as she returned the ardent kisses which he imprinted on her moist red lips. Then she gazed with an expression of the most enthusiastic affection and admiration, on the fine countenance of her seducer; and a passionate love shone in the splendid blue eyes of this charming creature.

Having compelled her to lay aside her bonnet and scarf, and seating himself by her side on a sofa, with his left arm encircling her waist and his right hand locked in her's, the Prince said, "To me, dearest Octavia, it has appeared an age since last we met."

"And to me also!" murmured the lovely girl.

"Never did you seem so radiantly beautiful as

you are this evening, my Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, at that moment forgetting the Countess of Desborough as completely as if there were no such being in existence.

"And never did you appear in my eyes so eminently handsome," was the soft response. "But even though we have been separated for an entire age, during your absence in the country," continued the charming Octavia, her eyes and countenance becoming overpoweringly brilliant in light and beauty as a glow of impassioned animation flooded her exquisite features,—"I have nevertheless had something to console me," she added with the most winning archness.

"Indeed!" cried the Prince, straining her affectionately to his bosom.

"Yes: your portrait!" said Octavia, with the same tone and manner of playful slyness.

"My portrait!" repeated his Royal Highness.

"It is as I tell you," continued Miss Clarendon "A few days ago my sister and myself visited a print-shop to purchase some drawings: and there we saw a portrait which had just been issued of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"Ah!" ejaculated her lover, fixing his eyes upon her countenance in order to read in its expression whether she entertained any suspicion of his identity with the heir-apparent to the English throne.

"Yes," she resumed, with an artlessness of manner that relieved all his fears on that head in a moment: "the portrait of the Prince caught my view—and I was instantaneously struck by the extraordinary resemblance which it bore to you. Pauline made the same remark—and I purchased it. Oh! my dearest George, I can assure you that ever since that day I have passed hours at a time in gazing upon the noble countenance delineated on that paper; and the longer I have dwelt on it, the more wonderful has the likeness appeared. The same high and intellectual forehead—the same hair—the same facial outline—even to the very expression of the features——"

"You flatter me too highly, charming girl, in thus comparing me to the Prince," said his Royal Highness, suddenly silencing her with a rapturous kiss.

"Oh! far from it!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms about his neck; and retaining her countenance at a short distance from his own, she surveyed him with renewed earnestness and impassioned attention. "Is it not strange that the resemblance should be so perfect in all its details?"

"There are instances of extraordinary likenesses of this kind, my love," answered the Prince. "You have doubtless read in the newspapers the recent romantic trial in which Sir Richard Stamford bore a part; and you may remember that this gentleman is represented as strikingly resembling the Royal Family."

"Yes—I recollect," said Octavia. "But, although I have never seen him, I do not think for a moment that he can bear so perfect a likeness to the Prince as yourself. And now, my beloved George, tell me when you intend to seek an introduction to my father and visit us in Cavendish Square. Oh! I implore you to interpose no unnecessary delay in taking that step! There are times—pardon me for speaking thus frankly—when I tremble from head to foot lest my father should discover the secret of my love—our stolen interviews——"

"Have patience, sweet Octavia, for a few weeks longer," said the Prince; "and then——"

"A few weeks!" she repeated, in a tone of almost anguished disappointment. "Oh! wherefore this long interval——"

"It is absolutely necessary that I should settle certain family affairs, my beloved Octavia," interrupted his Royal Highness,—"before I can present myself at your abode. Be assured, however, that no farther delay shall take place——"

"But in the meantime, what is to prevent you from forming the acquaintance of my father?" asked Octavia, an indistinct doubt of her lover's sincerity—a doubt faint as the hue which the red rose-leaf throws upon marble—agitating her mind for a moment, but softly and slightly as the flower waves in the still air: then, ashamed and angry at herself for having allowed such a suspicion to flash across her mind even for an instant, she hastened to observe, "I believe all you tell me, dearest George—I have the utmost confidence in your love and in your honour: but, Oh! you will render me completely happy—you will make me the most joyous being on the face of the earth—if you will only grant my request, and seek an introduction to my father."

The Prince was troubled by these words, in which there was an appealing earnestness showing that Octavia was accustomed to reflect upon the delay which he interposed in becoming a visitor at Mr. Clarendon's dwelling upon the usual terms of acquaintanceship prior to assuming the more decisive part of a suitor for the hand of that gentleman's elder daughter: and when he coupled this anxiety on her side with the affair of the portrait, he dreaded lest the most trivial incident or the slightest casualty should lead to a discovery of his princely rank.

"You are silent, my beloved—you appear to be vexed with me for having spoken so frankly on a subject which nearly and closely concerns my happiness?" exclaimed Octavia, with a sweetness of tone and manner that was charmingly seductive though unaffectedly natural. "Oh! I am certain that you cannot be offended with me, George! Remember that I have refused you no proof of my ardent and eternal affection; and you surely will not deny me this easily accomplished testimony of your own. You say that you have family affairs to settle: but they cannot prevent you from forming new acquaintances, if you will. Even supposing that your relations should object to your union with me, they would not suspect that you entertained the idea of such an alliance from the simple fact of obtaining an introduction to our house. Besides, dear George, the time must come when you will accomplish your solemn vows—your sacred pledges——"

"Can you doubt it, my beloved?" exclaimed the Prince, scarcely knowing how to reply to a series of arguments which were incontrovertible. "Do not question me for the present, I implore you: in a few weeks you will cease to have occasion for annoyance on this head. In love there must be a blind confidence—an implicit faith—a full reliance;—or else it is not a sincere and deeply-rooted affection."

"Do you for a moment doubt my love?" murmured Octavia, the tears starting forth upon her long lashes. "Oh! it were cruel indeed to suspect the intensity of that devotion—that idolatry—that worship which I experience towards you. For do you know, George, that if you were to prove faithless to

me, I should go mad—or else I should end my days in suicide? I could not survive the loss of your love: it is the air which I breathe—it seems to have absorbed all other ties that bound me to existence ere I knew the happiness of thus loving and being beloved. And I will tell you what a strange—what a dreadful dream I had the other night:—indeed, it was on the very night following the day on which I procured the portrait that I call *yours*. On retiring to my chamber, and after Pauline was asleep, I sate up for an hour contemplating that picture, and comparing all its lineaments with your own: for your image is so faithfully and accurately impressed upon my mind, that I see you before me, even when we are separated, as plainly as I behold you now. Well, having studied that portrait until its lips appeared to smile at me and its eyes to look love to mine, I retired to rest. Sleep came upon me; and then methought that I was seated with you in a delicious arbour. It was Spring-time: the blossoms fed the air with their fragrance—the heavens were of cloudless blue and stainlessly sunny—and the birds carolled in their verdant retreats. We sate gazing upon each other in silence — our looks speaking more eloquently than our words could have done. Oh! thus far the dream was elysian: my soul was bathed in happiness ineffable. But suddenly a gorgeous train of nobles and brilliantly-dressed ladies appeared in sight; and starting from your seat—tearing yourself from my arms—you hurried towards the procession, as if to command that it should pass on without recognising you. But a name was spoken by some voice—and that name was the Prince of Wales. The sickness of death came over me—and I fainted. When I returned to consciousness, I fancied that utter darkness had closed in around me. Rising from the cold ground to which I had fallen, I groped my way amidst densely interwoven shrubs and thickly growing trees, the dew from the foliage moistening all my garments and damping my hair which I believed to be streaming wildly and dishevelled over my shoulders. Suddenly I saw a light in the distance: I advanced towards it;—every instant it grew stronger and stronger—until a glorious blaze of lustre flowed from the open portals of a church. Impelled by that strange influence which hurries us on in our dreams, and which indeed sometimes prompts us in our actions when we are awake, I entered the sacred edifice. With trembling steps, and an appalling presentiment of evil lying like a weight of lead upon my heart, I approached the altar, around which I beheld assembled that gorgeous train of nobles and ladies whom I had seen in the earlier portion of my vision. But *one* form stood out in proud contrast from all the rest; and that form was thine, my George. But scarcely had my eyes thus settled upon you, when the solemn voice of the clergyman bestowed the nuptial blessing upon yourself and a lady whose hand you held in your own. A rending shriek escaped my lips—and I awoke. Nor was that shriek a part of the dream—but a real expression of indescribable anguish: for Pauline had been awakened by it—and, seriously alarmed, she inquired what was the matter. I soothed her apprehensions on my account by telling her that I had experienced a horrible dream, but the nature of which I did not unfold to her. For the remainder of the night my feverish brow pressed a sleepless pillow; and never—never was the dawn of morning more welcome. Oh! this dream has haunted me oftentimes since—yes, a hundred times during the few days which have elapsed since it occurred."

"But you put no faith in idle visions, my beloved?" said the Prince, more profoundly troubled than before at the strange narrative which had come from Octavia's lips, and which he would have interrupted more than once during the recital, had he not been enchained by the species of fearful and prophetic interest wherewith it was invested. "Such a dream is easily accounted for, dearest," he continued: "you had been gazing on a portrait in which you traced a resemblance to me—it was the predominant idea in your mind when sleep fell upon your eyes—and your imagination wreathed a host of wild and romantic fancies into the vivid and strongly-coloured texture of a vision."

"Oh! I am well aware that this is the true mode to account for it," exclaimed Octavia: "but it was not the less painful at the time—and the frequent trains of melancholy thought which its remembrance engenders, distress me occasionally more than I could possibly make you understand."

"Of what nature are those thoughts, my beloved?" inquired the Prince, determined to probe the young lady's mind to the very bottom, since the discourse had turned on this subject; and moreover, he felt that he was already standing on the verge of an abyss.

"You will only chide me if I give you the explanation you desire, dear George," said Octavia, casting a timid look upon her lover.

"No—on the contrary, I wish you to be frank and explicit, my angel," returned the Prince: "for it is my duty and my desire to tranquillise all your misgivings," he added insidiously.

"Misgivings! Oh! I have none when with you," cried the lovely creature, pressing her lips upon his cheek. "But you asked me for an explanation of those thoughts which my dream has left behind, and which steal upon me at times in spite of every effort which I make to throw them off. For, when alone, or if at all dispirited, I find myself giving way to sad imaginings, akin to that vision, and which cause me infinite torture. I reflect that if you were indeed other than you have represented yourself—if the portrait should prove to be so perfect a resemblance of you, because you are its real original—and if I have surrendered up my heart, and what is more—my honour—to the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms,—Oh! then madness or suicide would be the result. For innocence is a balm even to the breaking heart: but that anodyne would not be mine! On occasions, my thoughts are continued in another strain;—and instead of foreseeing madness or suicide as the crowning catastrophe, it appears to me as if all my love would turn to the bitterest hate, and that I would even throw myself at the feet of the King and demand justice against his son, my seducer! But, when I succeed in arousing my mind from these most painful reveries, I am so ashamed—so vexed—so angry at having given way to speculations so wild and to suspicions so injurious, my beloved George, to you, that I am thrown into a perfect fever of excitement; and the blood circulates like lightning in my veins—my ears tingle—my tongue grows parched—my temples throb—my eye-balls burn! And now you will pardon me, my George, for having thus frankly unbosomed myself to you;—and you will cease to be asto-

nished if I still urge my prayer that you will lose no time in obtaining from some mutual friend an introduction to my father."

"You know not how profoundly I am afflicted, my beloved Octavia," said the Prince, with his most melting tone and soothing manner, "by all you have told me this evening. The idea that I can possibly be any other than your own George Harley, is of course too ridiculous to need any protestation on my part. But that you should give way to such desponding thoughts at one time, and to such maddening reflections at another,—this it is that so deeply grieves me. Now, my adored girl," he exclaimed, in an impassioned tone, "I beseech you, by that love which you bear for me—by that love which I entertain for you,—by all our past happiness and future hopes, Octavia,—do I conjure you to place unlimited confidence in me. I ask but a delay of six weeks: at the end of that time I will give you such reasons for my conduct as shall make you regret that you even for an instant mistrusted my sincerity. What those reasons are, I cannot—must not—will not at present explain——"

"Oh! your anger would kill me!" exclaimed the yielding and tender Octavia, flinging herself upon her lover's breast and weeping profusely. "Yes—I will grant the delay which you have demanded ——My God! I have no alternative——And now kiss me—tell me that you are no longer chagrined with me: for, oh! your love has become so necessary to my happiness—it is a part of my very life!"

"Yes—I will kiss away those tears, my angel!" said the Prince, straining her in his arms.

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CHAPTER LXV.

THE MILLINER'S PARLOUR.

We must now return to Mrs. Brace's parlour, into which Lord Florimel was introduced by Harriet, the lady's-maid, a few minutes after the Prince of Wales had quitted it to join the lovely Octavia in another apartment.

"This is a pleasure which I little expected, my dear Gabriel," exclaimed the milliner,—"the promise you sent me in reply to my note, having remained unfulfilled for several days."

"I wish to God the note had never been sent to me at all!" cried Florimel, throwing himself with an unfeigned air of vexation upon a seat.

"What can you mean?" demanded Mrs. Brace. "Was not the bearer a truly divine creature?"

"And it is precisely because a divine creature *was* the bearer of the letter, that I am half maddened by the result," returned Florimel.

"Indeed!" ejaculated the milliner, now recalling to mind the little incident which had occurred in respect to the charming daughters of Mr. Clarendon and Camilla Morton.

"I am driven to desperation," resumed Florimel. "Octavia and Pauline were passing my house when your beautiful messenger came out—and all kinds of detrimental suspicions have been the consequence. If you had sent an old hag of sixty, there would have been no harm: but to make that sylph-like creature the bearer of your note—a heavenly being who appears to be in mourning for the deaths her fine eyes have inflicted——"

"She is indeed angelic," observed Mrs. Brace.

"Angelic!" repeated Florimel: "I must admit that all possible ideas of female loveliness are realised and combined in her person—my own Pauline being left out of the question. But Pauline is as cruel as she is beautiful. Only conceive my astonishment—my grief—my despair, when, a few hours after your messenger had called—and just as I was about to pay a visit to Mr. Clarendon's house in Cavendish Square—a note came from Pauline, upbraiding me with my perfidy—explaining the reasons of her anger—and begging that everything might be considered at an end between us."

"And can you not console yourself for the loss of Pauline, by the possession of Camilla?" asked Mrs. Brace. "If so, I promise you that the sweet girl shall become your conquest ——"

"I dare not think of it!" interrupted Florimel, almost savagely. "And yet when I reflect that Pauline has not even condescended to notice the explanatory letters which I have sent her—and that she has refused to see me when I called ——"

"This is a cruelty surpassing all I ever heard of," said Mrs. Brace. "It would bring the haughty beauty to her senses if you were to give her a rival in reality."

"I am so grieved—so vexed, that I know not how to act," exclaimed the young nobleman. "The truth is, as I have already assured you, that I love Pauline—worship—adore her ——"

"But you are not to be made the butt of her caprices and whims," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "Come, my dear Gabriel—manifest an independent spirit ——"

"You seem most anxious that I should become the bidder in the market for this charming flower—this beauteous Camilla!" cried Florimel, in a tone of impatience: and yet he had not the moral courage to put an end to the discourse, or fly away from the sphere of temptation. "But the truth is, my dear friend," he continued hastily,—"that young creature has only recently lost her parents—she is still in mourning for them—and it would be a scandal and a shame to wrong her. No—I could not do it—I could not do it!" he added emphatically, his better feelings obtaining the mastery over his mind.

"It would not be the first orphan whom you had seduced, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace.

"No — unfortunately —— But I will not be tempted!" he exclaimed abruptly.

At this moment the door opened, and Camilla Morton entered the room, to make some inquiry of Mrs. Brace respecting a piece of work on which she was engaged: but, the instant she beheld that her mistress was not alone, she murmured a rapid apology for the intrusion, and was about to withdraw.

"Do not go away, my dear child," said the milliner, in that kind and motherly tone which she was in the habit of assuming towards her young ladies—especially to those who had not as yet fallen into the meshes of seduction: "this is Lord Florimel—that good nobleman to whom you took a letter for me the other day, and who has called to liquidate the demands which I had upon his extravagant cousin. Now, my love—what is it you wish to know?"

Camilla advanced with modest timidity, holding in her hand the piece of work; and displaying it to

her mistress, she put sundry queries, which Mrs. Brace took as long a time to answer as possible. Indeed she elaborated her instructions so much that she succeeded in detaining the young girl upwards of five minutes in the room—during which interval Lord Florimel could not take his eyes off her. For her mourning garb rendered her so sweetly interesting and set off to such advantage the beauty of her complexion, that the nobleman felt all his good resolves thawing within him and all his grosser passions as rapidly excited.

When Camilla quitted the room, followed by the enraptured looks of Florimel,—she herself, however, not observing the intentness of his gaze,—Mrs. Brace said, with one of her most fascinating and archest smiles, "Is she not perfect?"

"Ravishing!" exclaimed the young nobleman, unable to subdue his enthusiasm. "If I did not love Pauline, I could love Camilla."

"And you will love her all the same," said the milliner. "Next Sunday evening you will sup with me: Camilla alone shall be present with us. In the meantime—for this is only Monday—I shall have leisure to insinuate into her mind all those little praises concerning you which produce so great an effect upon young persons."

"No—no—I will not promise—I will not come!" ejaculated Florimel.

"There can at all events be no harm in your passing an agreeable evening," urged Mrs. Brace.

"Well, well—I will think of it—I will let you know to-morrow," said Gabriel: and hastily shaking the milliner's hand, he took an abrupt departure.

"That matter is as good as settled," murmured Mrs. Brace to herself as the door closed behind the retreating form of the young nobleman. "Camilla will be worth a thousand guineas to me in the very first instance."

Scarcely had the unprincipled—selfish—heartless woman made this reflection, when Harriet again entered, ushering in Mrs. Lindley, the old midwife of Fore Street, Lambeth. The servant immediately withdrew; and the harridan paid her respects to Mrs. Brace, glancing however suspiciously round the room to assure herself, with her habitual caution, that no listener was near.

"What brings you hither, my good friend?" inquired Mrs. Brace.

"Hush!—not so loud;—walls have ears!" murmured the midwife, speaking in a low whisper, and placing a long lean finger to her lip. "That dear girl, Caroline Walters——"

"Ah! what—already?" ejaculated the milliner, bending forward in an attitude of earnest attention.

"Hush—a miscarriage!" said the old woman, who, having by this time put on her spectacles with the great circular glasses, fixed her small dark, reptile-like eyes through them upon the countenance of Mrs. Brace. "Yes—a miscarriage——"

"Well—that is a matter for rejoicing," observed the milliner. "But how is she?"

"Somewhat excited — irritable — and nervous," was the answer. "When the pains first took her, she insisted upon having a surgeon—and she grew quite violent because I remonstrated with her. I was therefore compelled to yield to her request—and she became comparatively tranquil. When the babe was born, and the doctor pronounced it to be dead, she insisted on seeing it; and weak and suffering as she was, such a terrible expression swept over her countenance that if I were to live for a thousand years I could not forget it. But—hush! what noise was that?" demanded the midwife, with startled manner and in a hurried whisper.

"Nothing—nothing: a carriage in the street," returned the milliner. "But this expression of countenance——"

"Was of the darkest — most fiend-like malignity," added the old woman. "I could not have supposed that such a young creature was susceptible of such a hellish passion as that which alone could have produced such a look. But then, as she herself has told me, Spanish blood circulates in her veins——"

"And what can this fact have to do with the demoniac expression that her features suddenly assumed?" demanded Mrs. Brace.

"Vengeance upon her seducer!—vengeance on the father of that still-born babe!" replied Mrs. Lindley, in so low a tone that her words would not have been audible were they in the least degree less emphatic. "I am accustomed to read the soul through the index of the countenance; and never was a feeling more eloquently—more intelligibly — or more fearfully expressed upon human lineaments."

"You surprise — grieve — alarm me," said Mrs. Brace. "But perhaps it was the effect of a sudden paroxysm of pain——"

"No: I can easily distinguish between physical anguish and the workings of the mind," interrupted Mrs. Lindley. "So struck was I by the incident which I have mentioned, that I determined to call and communicate it to you by word of mouth: otherwise I should have merely announced the *accouchement* of Miss Walters, by means of a letter. But believe me, my dear madam," added the midwife impressively,—"believe me, I say, that this young girl meditates some scheme of infernal vengeance against her seducer; and as such a proceeding might lead to an exposure of all the circumstances of her case, whatever they may be——"

"Yes—yes: I comprehend you," said Mrs. Brace, nervously: "and that exposure would perhaps involve the mention of my name in a manner extremely prejudicial to my establishment."

"That is precisely what I foresaw," observed the midwife; "and therefore I resolved to call and give you due warning of the vindictive sentiments which Miss Walters undoubtedly cherishes towards her seducer."

"I take it very kind of you, my good friend—I am infinitely obliged to you," exclaimed the milliner. "In the course of the week I will call and see Caroline—and I shall be able to tranquillise her. If not, I must get her sent down into the country the moment she is well enough to leave your house."

"That would be by far the best plan," said Mrs. Lindley: "or else," she added, after a short pause, "*out of the country altogether.*"

"Something of the kind, decidedly," returned the milliner. "By the bye, Rachel Forrester will have to pay you another visit in the course of two or three weeks. You remember that I hinted something to this effect at the time when I introduced Caroline Walters to your establishment."

"I never forget any matter of business, my dear madam," said the midwife, suffering her features

to relax into a smile, which was nowever grim and repulsive enough.

She then rose and took her departure.

It being now the hour when supper was served up in the young ladies' room, Mrs. Brace repaired thither to preside at the table; and it was eleven o'clock when she returned to her own private parlour. The Prince of Wales was waiting for her there, Octavia Clarendon having left him a few minutes previously.

"The evils which you presaged just now, my dear friend," he said, speaking in an agitated manner, "are already developing themselves. Octavia has obtained my portrait, *in which she discovers a marvellous likeness to Mr. Harley.* And no wonder, indeed! But she has likewise had dreams which have left strange thoughts behind; and the faintest whisper—the slightest incident will cause the whole fatal truth to flash to her comprehension."

"She has told you all this?" said Mrs. Brace, seriously alarmed.

"Yes—and in the most artless manner possible," returned the Prince.

"Then wherefore did you not seize the opportunity to break to her gradually who you really are——"

"Because it is in the nature of man to put off the hour of evil or of danger as long as possible," interrupted his Royal Highness; "and because she frightened me by certain observations which she made."

"And those observations?" said the milliner inquiringly.

"Were to the effect that if I deceived her, she would throw herself at the feet of the King and demand justice!" responded the Prince, in a low and solemn tone. "The danger is most serious—most menacing! It would be as much as all my prospects of wearing the crown are worth ——"

"Yes: exposure would be terrible—ruinous!" said Mrs. Brace, in a musing manner.

"I have managed to obtain a delay of six weeks before the time when I have solemnly pledged my-

self to procure an introduction to her father," continued the Prince: "we have therefore ample leisure to decide upon some expedient. But if in the interval she should happen to see me in my carriage—— However," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "we must leave it to the chapter of accidents. If there's an exposure, we can't help it: and if there be none, so much the better."

Having thus endeavoured to console and reassure himself, his Royal Highness put on his cloak and hat, and took his departure.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE "SUBJECT."

It was midnight: and Mr. Thurston was seated by the fire in his surgery, reading a medical book.

He referred to his watch and found that it was twelve o'clock precisely.

A dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling: but in a few moments it was broken by the tinkling of the bell which hung in that room.

The surgeon started from his seat—threw the volume upon the table—and, opening the door leading into the yard, hastened to unfasten the gate communicating with the stables.

Two men instantly entered the premises, carrying some heavy and sinister-looking object between them, and as the pale beams of a sickly moon flickered on their repulsive countenances, a cold shudder passed even through the frame of the phlegmatic, selfish, and usually imperturbable Thurston.

"Punctual you see, sir, as clock-work," whispered the Buzgloak.

"This way—quick!" said Thurston; and the two men followed him into the surgery, on the floor of which they threw their burthen heavily.

It was *something* long and supple, enclosed in a large sack!

We have already stated, in a previous chapter, that there were three doors to the surgery,—one communicating with the consulting-parlour, the second with the yard, and the third with an apartment of which we promised to give further details.

Throwing open the door of this apartment, and leading the way with a light in his hand, Mr. Thurston bade the two men follow him with their burthen.

The room thus entered was small and nearly naked in respect to furniture. A long dissecting table—a pail to catch the fluid which flowed from a corpse when opened—a rope suspended to a pulley fixed to the ceiling, and used to raise the head of the "subject" as high as the purposes of the experimentalist might require—and several anatomical instruments scattered about upon the table,—these were the principal features of the place. A dark green curtain covered the window, which was protected by iron bars; and the floor was strown with coarse red sand.

Miles the Buzgloak and Dick the Tramper carried their burthen into this apartment; and while one retained a tight hold of the bottom of the sack, the other, removing a cord which closed the mouth, proceeded to drag forth its contents. A human head appeared—then the upper part of a man's body—and, the sack being abruptly drawn away, the entire form was exposed to view, dressed in the garments which it had on when cut down from the fatal beam in front of Newgate!

For "the subject" thus purchased by the surgeon was Ramsey the forger; and a portion of the halter still encircled his neck!

The countenance was as colourless as Parian marble—but neither distorted nor hideous. All the convulsive workings which are inseparable from so violent a death as that of strangulation by the accursed cord, seemed to have subsided, by the subsequent relaxation of the features, into that calm and sleep-like placidity which follows an easy and natural dissolution. The eyes were closed—the long dark lashes resting motionless upon those cheeks whereon not a hue nor a tint of life was left: the mouth was partially open—the fine teeth gleaming between the pale lips. Over the brow fell curls of black hair, soft and silky as that of a woman; and it was easy to perceive that ere this countenance lost the animation of vitality, it must have been pre-eminently handsome and well calculated to make an impression on the heart of a susceptible lady.

"Well—what d'ye think of this here stiff'un?" demanded Miles the Buzgloak of the surgeon.

"Stiff'un be damned!" ejaculated Dick the Tramper. "It's as limp and yielding as a young babby; and a more lovelier corpse I never set eyes on. It's quite a pleasure and a recreation like to surwey such a speciimen of dead natur'—for I s'pose I may call it in that there manner."

"I'm blowed if you ain't getting sentimental over it, Dick," said the Buzgloak, casting a look of deep disgust upon his comrade.

"And the sooner you place the body upon that table, the better I shall be pleased," exclaimed the surgeon, with an imperious motion of the hand.

"Heave him up, Miles," said the Tramper; and the subject was speedily stretched at full length on the dissecting-board, its head resting on the elevated part at one extremity.

Mr. Thurston then conducted the two men back into the surgery, where he counted down the stipulated sum.

"All right!" said the Buzgloak, taking up the coin. "At any future time, sir, we shall be glad of your orders as heretofore. You must admit that we did the thing well in this here instance—togging ourselves off spruce, and going to the Sheriff's as if we was Ramsey's most particular buzzim friends——"

"And imploring that the body might be given up to us to receive decent burial," added the Tramper.

"Ah! it was finely managed—and no mistake," continued Miles. "White cambrie fogles up to our eyes—a precious snivelling look about us—a few holler groans——"

"I have no doubt you played your part to perfection," interrupted Mr. Thurston. "Good night to you both," he added, with that abruptness which unmistakably told the two men he would rather have their room than their company.

They accordingly took their departure; and Mr. Thurston returned to the dissecting-chamber.

Holding the candle in his hand, he approached the table: but suddenly he started—and though naturally courageous as well as utterly devoid of superstitious belief, he staggered back a few paces, as the light was reflected in something shining on the face of the form stretched upon that table.

A second glance convinced the surgeon that Ramsey's eyes were open; and at the same instant that this certainty flashed to his mind, the hanged man moved his head slowly round.

Thurston's terror—even if the feeling deserved so emphatic a name—was only momentary; and rushing up to the dissecting board, whereon he placed the light, he examined Ramsey's countenance with earnest attention for a few instants. Yes—he was alive: and the surgeon hastened to remove the cord from his throat: then having procured some restoratives from the pharmacy, he applied them with such good effect that the criminal speedily revived.

But as he lay gasping with the efforts made by the expanding lungs to resume their functions, it suddenly struck Thurston that he was now placed in a most painful position. What was he to do with the man, should he completely recover? To hand him up again to justice were impossible: for such a step would render himself liable to the penalties of the law for having suborned individuals to obtain possession of the body by false and illegitimate means. To turn him adrift into the streets was an act from which even the selfish mind of the surgeon revolted;—and to keep him for any length of time at the house was dangerous as well as being repugnant to his feelings.

These reflections swept through the brain of Thurston as he stood by the side of the table, watching the spasmodic writhings which shook the strong frame of the man who was throwing off the coils of death:—and now consciousness slowly, slowly dawned in upon Ramsey's soul—but only as a feeble lamp, taken into a charnel-house, gradually and one by one lights up the horrors of the place.

First he remembered that he had been doomed to die: next his imagination showed him the terrible paraphernalia of the scaffold—the black beams—the countless crowds around;—then the death-knell seemed again to be tolling in his ears, and his fancy revived the funeral service as it was droned forth by the Ordinary;—and lastly there was the fall of the fatal drop, followed by the tremendous jerk experienced at the throat, and the gush of blood, hot as fire, up into the burning, bursting brain.

Oh! how agonising was the spasm which shook the criminal from the hair of his head to the soles of his feet as the slow operation of a languidly reviving consciousness brought his memory down to this appalling catastrophe;—and a hollow moan of anguish burst from his lips. Then closing his eyes, he seemed to exert all his powers to steady, collect, and settle his thoughts—so that he might assure himself how much was a horrible dream and how much was a hideous reality.

At length, slowly raising his heavy lids again, he fixed his looks searchingly upon the countenance of the medical man; and thence his eyes wandered round the room, as if he were unable to comprehend where he was or what phase of existence, mortal or eternal, had succeeded the agonies produced by the fall of the drop.

But suddenly a light flashed upon his mind; and the convulsion which it caused him to experience unlocked his tongue.

"You are a surgeon," he said, in a faint voice;—and then his eyes were fixed beseechingly upon him to whom those words were addressed.

"Yes: but tranquillise yourself," answered Thurston: "I will not betray you."

A feeble smile moved the lips of Ramsey as this assurance fell upon his ear; and Thurston, lifting the still powerless wretch from the table, carried him into the surgery, where he placed him in an arm-chair before the cheerful fire that was still blazing in the grate. He next administered some hot brandy-and-water; and in another half-hour the criminal was resuscitated beyond all danger of a relapse.

"I will now tell you," said Thurston, "how I propose to act with regard to you. As a matter of course I know who you are and all about you: but prudence requires that you should not know who I am or whereabouts in London this dwelling is situated. It will be impossible to remove you hence for some hours: you will therefore occupy a bed beneath my roof until to-morrow night—during which interval you will be comparatively restored to strength. I will then adopt measures to place you in a condition of security and beyond the reach of danger."

With tears streaming from his eyes did Ramsey pour forth his soul in gratitude to the surgeon who was thus performing—though rather in obedience to necessity than to his own free will—the first generous action which had ever characterised his life.

Circumstances now absolutely required that Mrs Thurston should be made acquainted with what had occurred. She knew that her husband expected a subject that night; and it was not, therefore, very difficult to break the truth to her. For it would have been impossible for the surgeon to lodge Ramsey in any bed-room without her knowledge; and her connivance was also necessary to prevent the domestics from suspecting that a guest was in the house under circumstances so mysterious as to lead them to hazard all kinds of disagreeable conjectures.

He accordingly informed Ramsey of the necessity which compelled him to make a confidant of his wife; and he quitted the surgery to seek her chamber for that purpose.

But scarcely had the door closed behind him, when a thousand wild and terrible ideas rushed to the imagination of the unhappy man whom he left seated in the arm-chair.

Was the alleged reason for the surgeon's absence merely a pretext to lull suspicion while he went out to fetch a constable?—did the medical practitioner intend to consign him back again to the grasp of justice?—should he have to mount the scaffold a second time? Oh! the thoughts were agonising—excruciating; and every instant they acquired a deeper and stronger hold upon the miserable wretch's mind, enfeebled and attenuated as it was by the terrible phase through which his existence had just passed.

It never struck him, in the horrified disorder of that train of reflections which swept across his fevered imagination, that Thurston had no need to resort to subterfuge if he were playing a treacherous part; but that he might have alarmed the house, or have easily bound the resuscitated criminal in his chair until an officer was summoned. No—nothing of all this presented itself to Ramsey's contemplation. His thoughts were in a state of horrible whirlwind: his brain was a delirium.

He must fly—Oh! he must fly from this house of an enemy—from this abode of a man who was about to deliver him up to justice: he must fly—he must fly!

Such were his frantic thoughts;—and despair suddenly nerved him with the strength to execute his purpose. Rising from his seat, he staggered forward a few paces: then he clung to the mantel for support. Again he endeavoured to walk—and this time his step was firmer. He reached the table, on which he leant to steady himself. The decanter of brandy was there; and he poured a quantity down his throat. It seemed to circulate throughout his entire system: he felt that his cheeks were flushing—that his heart was palpitating more quickly—that his legs grew stronger under him. Glancing around, he recognised the door leading from the dissecting-room: then he beheld that by which Thurston had quitted the surgery;—and it consequently struck him that he would try the third. Advancing towards it, he saw a cloak and a hat hanging upon pegs. These articles of apparel he instantly appropriated to his own use; and, still maddened by the excruciating idea that the surgeon was playing him false, he passed into the yard—entered the mews—and thence gained the street.

The fresh air of the night invigorated him: but still he walked languidly—like a man who goes out for the first time on foot after a long and dangerous illness.

Not being well acquainted with London, he knew not where he was; and his thoughts were still too much confused—or rather so harrowed by the horrible fears which had impelled him to quit the surgeon's house—that he paused not to consider whither he should go or what he should do. He reflected not that he was penniless—destitute,—worse, ten thousand times worse than the grovelling beggar in the street: for the meanest mendicant dared show his face in public;—but he—this man fresh from the gibbet—this living proof of the executioner's unskilfulness—this resuscitated subject of the dissecting-room,—Oh! the blackest night was not too dark to veil *his* countenance—to wrap *his* features in its funereal pall!

But of these tremendous truths the wretched creature thought not as he dragged himself along with all the speed which he was capable of exerting. For it was not enough to have escaped from the surgeon's house: it was necessary to avoid pursuit. Such was now the idea that dominated his mind;—and over-taxing his feeble powers, he soon found that he was exhausted—soon felt that he was sinking!

He was now in a vast Square; and even at that late hour, lights were visible through the rich draperies of many windows. Strains of delicious music—the piano and the harp—poured forth their melody in sweet cadences, accompanied by soft voices in harmonious modulation. Roseate, warm, and tender were the scenes of luxury within the mansions where pleasure thus prevailed: chill was the atmosphere without, as the wretched wanderer sate down on a door-step to recruit his shattered energies.

By this time the whirl of his giddy brain was yielding to the presence of graver and more collected thoughts; and he began to perceive how mad—how foolish—how imprudent he had been to quit the surgeon's abode. His late suspicions with regard to that individual now appeared so ridiculous—so monstrously absurd—that he hated and loathed himself for having given way to them.

What was to be done? All the utter friendlessness of his position—all the misery upon which he had rushed headlong by abandoning that hospitable roof—all the perils which he was encountering face to face, passed like a hideous phantasmagorian train before his eyes. The cooler his imagination grew, the stronger was the hold that dismay, perplexity, and horror took upon him. At length, after several minutes' fearful meditation, he suddenly resolved to retrace his steps to the medical man's abode.

Inspired by this idea, he raised himself painfully from the cold stones, and advanced languidly half round the square, endeavouring to recognise the street by which he had entered it. Vain attempt! So fevered was his imagination when proceeding thither, that he had taken no note of any particular buildings which might now serve him as landmarks;—and, in total bewilderment, he sank down again at the door of a vast mansion.

Exhausted—spirit-broken—reduced to despair, the wretched being fruitlessly essayed to struggle against the death-like sensations which came over him: the crushing feelings were stronger than his powers of resistance—and he fell back in a deep swoon.

A few minutes afterwards, a splendid equipage dashed up to the front of the dwelling. Down leapt the two tall footmen from behind—the door of the vehicle was opened—the steps were lowered—and the Earl of Desborough, immediately alighting, assisted his charming Countess to descend.

One of the footmen had already discovered Ramsey lying upon the steps.

"The gentleman is not dead, my lord—only in a faint," said the servant, in reply to a hasty question which the Earl put.

"Then, by all means, convey him into the house and have him properly cared for," exclaimed the nobleman; "while some one hastens to fetch our physician."

"He is recovering, my lord—slightly recovering," observed the footman, who, assisted by the other domestic, had raised Ramsey from the cold pavement. "With due deference, I do not think he will require the doctor."

"I am glad of it, for his sake—poor gentleman!" said Lord Desborough. "He is evidently a respectable person—and quite a young man too," added the Earl, as the moonbeams now fell on Ramsey's countenance. "Hasten and lift him into the house."

This command was immediately obeyed; and the resuscitated convict was borne to a chamber in the lordly mansion.

The Earl, having wished an affectionate good night to his beautiful Countess, who repaired to her own apartment, followed the domestics to the room whither they had carried the unhappy man. Spirits, essences, and other restoratives were speedily procured: but even before they were applied, Ramsey had recovered sufficient consciousness to enable him to perceive that he was in a handsome chamber and experiencing friendly treatment. Fortunately, his presence of mind so far accompanied the returning reason as to inspire him with a lively sense of the imperious necessity of maintaining an iron control over himself, as an inadvertent word would engender the most dangerous suspicions; and suddenly remembering *that there must be an ominous mark about his neck*—the fatal sign of the halter—he shuddered as he thought of the awful risk of discovery which he had run!

But it luckly happened that the footmen had deposited him in a large easy chair before they even

unfastened the collar of the cloak which he wore; and, as the candles were placed on a high mantel, his neck, though now exposed, was in the shade.

Raising his eyes, and encountering the benevolent looks of the Earl of Desborough, Ramsey murmured some few broken and indistinct words expressive of thanks for the generous treatment which he had received.

"I deserve no gratitude for performing a simple Christian duty," answered the nobleman. "As the Countess of Desborough and myself were returning home from a party, you were discovered in a deep swoon on the steps of our front-door; and common humanity dictated the rest. I hope that you already feel much better."

"Oh! much better, thank God!" exclaimed Ramsey: then, having understood from the Earl's observations who it was that had thus generously succoured him, he added, "My lord, it is more than a mere act of common humanity as the world goes—— But to-morrow, I will explain——"

"Do not attempt a syllable of explanation for the present!" interrupted the nobleman. "Are you sufficiently recovered to be left alone?—or will you have my own valet to assist you to undress and retire to repose?"

"I am sufficiently recovered, my lord——"

"Then good night to you, sir," said the Earl, in a kind tone: and, anxious to escape from any farther expression of thanks on the part of his guest, he quitted the apartment, followed by the two footmen.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE RESUSCITATED.

When Ramsey awoke at a late hour in the morning, he was some time before he could so far collect his thoughts as to remember all that had occurred during the past night.

He found himself lying in a sumptuous bed: and, on putting aside the curtains, he perceived that he was in a spacious and elegant chamber, fitted up with every attention to the most luxurious comfort.

No longer by sluggish degrees—but with whirlwind rapidity—the whole train of truths swept in unto his startled soul;—and remembering that the accursed mark must be upon his neck—a mark which perhaps would linger there for many days to come—he hurriedly raised his hand to the collar of his shirt. It was just as he had disposed it on retiring to rest; and, moreover, he recollected that he had fastened the door in order to prevent any one from entering the room and observing him while he slept.

Tranquillised by a conviction of security at least for the present, the resuscitated criminal was enabled to reflect with calmness upon his position.

He was in a house where he had received and was still enjoying the most generous hospitality: but it would be necessary to volunteer some explanation regarding himself. A tale must be invented—a name must be assumed. These were not difficult matters with one who had grown so inured to duplicity and deception as Ramsey; and in a very short time he had a plausible history ready to narrate when occasion should demand.

The time-piece upon the mantel showed him that it was eleven o'clock; and the light of day streaming through the window-curtains made him aware that it was the forenoon.

Rising from his bed, he unlocked the door; having done which, he retired to his couch again. For he not only felt weak and feeble still—but it likewise suited his purpose to represent himself to be so much exhausted as to afford an apology for remaining at the Earl of Desborough's mansion at least until night-fall. Nevertheless, it was equally requisite, on the other hand, that he should not appear so unwell as to induce the Earl to send for a medical man; inasmuch as some accident might reveal the fatal mark on his neck to the keen eye of professional experience.

Shortly after eleven, some one knocked at the door; and Ramsey invited the person to enter. A footman made his appearance, with the compliments of the Earl, who was anxious to know how his guest had slept and how he felt.

"Present my most grateful thanks to your noble master," said the resuscitated, "and inform him that I am considerably better; but that, with his lordship's permission, I will repose myself for a few hours longer."

The domestic bowed and retired; and shortly afterwards another servant entered the room, bearing a massive silver tray, on which were spread the materials for a luxurious breakfast.

When again left alone, Ramsey did justice to the meal; and he shuddered as he reflected that the last time food had passed his lips was within an hour of *the fatal eight o'clock* when he had ascended the steps leading to the scaffold!

Shortly after he had finished his breakfast, the resuscitated received a visit from the Earl of Desborough, who shook him kindly by the hand, and expressed the joy which he experienced on finding him in so improved a condition. For the nobleman had perceived at the first glance, by Ramsey's air and demeanour, that he was a gentleman—an impression which was speedily afterwards confirmed by the few words which had fallen from his lips when he was conveyed to that chamber, as already detailed. The Earl therefore treated him with a suitable courtesy; and, taking a chair near the bed-side, he said, "I beg that you will make my house your home until your full and complete recovery; and if you wish to communicate with your friends, my servants are at your disposal."

Now was the time for Ramsey to narrate his already well-concocted history.

"In again expressing my deep gratitude to your lordship," he said, "for the kindness I have experienced at your hands, I feel bound to inform you who I am, and under what circumstances I became reduced to the deplorable condition in which your lordship found me last night—or rather, at an early hour this morning. My name is Gustavus Wakefield—and my father was a West India planter, residing in Jamaica. I am an only son, and was brought up in all the indolence which characterises the existence of the wealthy in that clime. Ten months ago my father died, leaving his affairs in a most distracted state—so that when all his liabilities were duly and honourably settled, I found myself penniless. Happy, however, in having rescued the memory of a beloved parent from the stigma which would have attached itself to his name had his debts continued unliquidated, I embarked six weeks ago for England, in the hope that a good education, un-

exceptionable letters of introduction, and a resolution to do justice to any situation which I might be fortunate enough to procure, would enable me to vanquish an adverse fate and fortune and gain my bread. Yesterday morning I set foot for the first time in the British metropolis; and I resolved to devote one day to viewing the different attractions of this mighty city ere I delivered my letters and sought for employment. Having therefore procured a lodging in a house which I considered to be respectable, I left my small portmanteau there and sallied forth to render myself better acquainted with London. In the evening I returned to my lodging, exhausted with many hours' rambling; and sleep soon visited my eyes. But I was presently awakened by the most terrific screaming, fighting, and quarrelling; and hastily dressing myself, I rushed down stairs to protect the females who were being ill-treated. The door of a room stood open; and in that apartment I beheld an orgie of so disgusting a nature as to convince me in a moment that I had been cruelly deceived in respect to the character of the house. Interference with the brawlers I perceived to be useless; but I resolved not to remain another moment in a place whose very atmosphere was contamination. I therefore hurried up stairs—threw my portmanteau over my shoulder—and abruptly quitted the abode of infamy, although I had paid a week's rent in advance. Under the impression that I should find some tavern open, where I could take up my quarters, I hastened along—threading street after street—but observing that all the houses were closed. At length I grew so wearied that I was compelled to sit down and rest myself. Two respectable-looking men—at least so far as I could judge of them by the uncertain moonlight—accosted me; and I ingenuously told them all that had happened. They expressed their commiseration, and offered to conduct me to a decent tavern where I could obtain a bed for the rest of the night. Cordially thanking them for their proposal, I hesitated not to follow them. One of the men, noticing that I was much exhausted, insisted on carrying my portmanteau; and though I felt ashamed to give him so much trouble, I was compelled to yield to what appeared his generous solicitude. We walked on for some little distance, and at length entered a large Square. The man who had the portmanteau was a few paces in advance: his friend was by my side. All on a sudden this latter villain threw himself upon me—flung me violently upon the steps leading to a house-door—and rifled me of my purse and pocket-book. The resistance I made was feeble and ineffectual: for I was nearly stunned by the maltreatment I had received. Nevertheless, I *did* struggle with the ruffian to the utmost of my ability: but having succeeded in robbing me, he dashed me back again with such savage ferocity on the stones that I remember nothing more until I was aroused to consciousness beneath your lordship's roof."

Ramsey ceased; and with so much apparent frankness had he told his story, that the Earl of Desborough was completely deceived by it.

"It is a narrative the concluding incidents of which are unfortunately of no rare occurrence," said the nobleman. "Villanies of that class are more common than good deeds in this metropolis, Mr. Wakefield."

"But the laws—the magistrates—the constables, my lord," exclaimed Ramsey, with a well feigned simplicity, "will procure me the restoration of my property."

"There is not the least chance of recovering it," replied the Earl.

"My God! what will become of me?" ejaculated the hypocrite, clasping his hands together. "All that I possessed in the world was contained in the portmanteau and the purse; and in the pocket-book were the letters of introduction which I had brought with me from Jamaica!" he added, assuming a tone of deep despondency.

"Tranquillise yourself, Mr. Wakefield," said the nobleman: "you shall not leave this house penniless or friendless. I am not disposed to do things by halves; and your history—your manner—your language, all convince me that you are a deserving person. The honourable way in which you impoverished yourself to pay your father's debts, must enlist the sympathies of every humane heart in your favour: the precipitation with which you fled from a disreputable house led to the results which actually seem a punishment inflicted on virtue. But it may perhaps prove fortunate for you in the long run that you should have thus bitterly commenced your experience of London life: for the unpleasant adventure of last night has thrown you in my way—and I will not desert you."

It was easy for Ramsey to weep tears of joy—easy to express his thanks with an appearance of the most grateful ardour; and the generous, unsuspecting, kind-hearted nobleman was thereby confirmed in the good opinion which he had already entertained of his guest.

"You shall pass a few days beneath this roof, Mr. Wakefield," he said; "and in the interval we will talk over the different plans that I may suggest for your contemplation. I shall then be better able to judge of your views—your capacities—your inclinations; and my purse and interest shall alike be placed at your disposal."

"Ah! my lord," exclaimed Ramsey, "such goodness is indeed unprecedented. But I will not intrude many hours longer upon your lordship's hospitality. Naturally of retired habits—loving seclusion—and little acquainted with the manners and customs of English life, I should only render myself ridiculous by my awkwardness, which would likewise humiliate me and increase my embarrassment."

"At all events, Mr. Wakefield, the Countess and myself dine alone to-day," said the Earl; "and you will favour us with your company, if you be well enough to rise from your couch towards the evening. That you shall remain in this house until I can settle some plan for your benefit, I am determined: but whether you will keep your own room or join us at our table, shall be left to your discretion."

Having thus spoken, the Earl of Desborough took a temporary leave of the fictitious Mr. Wakefield, and repaired to the apartment of the Countess to recite to her ladyship all that their guest had told him.

An hour later the nobleman's valet entered Ramsey's room with a change of linen and other necessaries of the toilette; and soon after the domestic had retired, the criminal rose from his couch.

Fortunately he possessed a good suit of clothes—the very same in which he had appeared upon the

scaffold: and he was therefore enabled to attire himself in a becoming manner. A natural sentiment of vanity prompted him to devote considerable attention to his toilette; and the paleness which lingered on his cheeks gave him an interesting expression of countenance.

It was about five o'clock when his toilette was thus completed; and soon afterwards the Earl came to conduct him to the drawing-room, where he was introduced to Lady Desborough.

The Countess, as credulous as her husband in respect to the tale which Ramsey had so skilfully invented, received him with more courtesy—or rather, in a more frank and friendly manner than she would have evinced towards an utter stranger under ordinary circumstances; and, believing that her guest was totally unaccustomed to European habits, she endeavoured to place him at his ease, and divest him of all feelings of painful restraint. A well-bred woman, when amiable likewise, can speedily accomplish this: moreover, Ramsey's first semblance of embarrassment was thrown off with such artful gradiency, that Eleanor was enabled to flatter herself on having succeeded "in drawing him out" and making him feel himself at home.

In the story which he related to the Earl, he had fixed upon Jamaica as his birth-place and as the scene of his residence until within the last ten months, because he had read much concerning that island. He had relatives there; and from them had he been in the habit of receiving frequent letters, which, in amicable communicativeness, were wont to give long and detailed particulars of the manners, customs, and modes of life that signalised the planters. He was therefore enabled to converse with readiness and fluency on those subjects; and his observations were made with an appearance of all that inartificial ease which denotes the eye-witness of the things related.

His voice was particularly agreeable—his language excellent; and there was a melancholy in his tone, his manner, and his countenance which rivetted the interest of those who already compassionated the misfortunes which they believed him to have experienced.

Besides, he was handsome—very handsome;—and Eleanor could not help thinking so as she conversed with him. Indeed, she had not been two hours in his society ere she caught herself reflecting that he was one of the most agreeable men she had ever encountered in her life.

Oh! had some invisible spirit whispered in her ear that those features had been convulsed in the agonies of strangulation by the accursed halter of the hangman—that fierce spasmodic writhings had passed through that slender, symmetrical, and elegant form, as it quivered between the black beam above and the yawning drop beneath—and that the fascinating Gustavus Wakefield was none other than Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated convict,—Oh! how speedily would the smiles have fled from her charming cheeks—how loathingly she would have recoiled even though it were but the hem of her garment touching the clothes of the wretch—how full of unutterable horror would her soul have been at the mere thought of having met him face to face!

This shows, then, how strong is the force of imagination—how powerful is the influence of a prejudice. For now—behold Lady Desborough leaning upon the arm of Ramsey as he escorts her to the dining-room;—and she is already something more than contented with her companion—she is well pleased with him!

The dinner passed away;—and, after Eleanor had withdrawn, the Earl and Ramsey sate conversing upon various topics for a short time. But as the latter dared not indulge in deep potations, his head being still weak and his frame nervous,—and as the nobleman was habitually temperate,—they speedily rejoined the Countess in the drawing-room. There coffee was served; and the discourse was continued until a little after eleven, when Ramsey rose—bade his noble host and hostess good night—and withdrew to his own chamber.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE DEVIL'S PUNCH-BOWL.

On the road from London to Portsmouth, and at no great distance from Petersfield, there is a deep valley, or rather precipitate hollow, having no outlet between any of the circumjacent heights: so that it might be filled to the very brim with water. The country in the immediate neighbourhood was particularly wild and dismal at the time of which we are writing; and it is a gloomy and sinister-looking spot even at the present day.

The main road winds round a portion of the circumference of the vast hollow; and a stone on that side of the route which is next to the valley, marks the place where a horrible murder was committed many years ago upon the person of a sailor, whose corpse was thrown over the low embankment into the abyss. The assassins were discovered—condemned to death—and executed on the theatre of their crime. There they hung in chains for a long time—their blackened corpses scaring the lonely traveller, and the creaking of their irons sounding horribly in the ears of the passengers by chaise or coach.

From days immemorial the valley of which we are speaking has been known as the Devil's Punch-Bowl.

But we must give some more explicit idea of the place as it was in the year 1795, whereof our tale at present treats.

All around, the sides of this immense hollow were escarped and precipitate—the ruggedness of the surface being concealed by thick furze, brambles, and rank grass. The road was narrow—separated only from the abyss by a small bank, scarcely two feet in height; so that a tipsy man or a wayfarer ignorant of the precise features of the locality, might easily fall over, on a dark night, into the yawning profundity. Over the other side of the road frowned a portion of the hill out of which the route itself had been cut, and which rose in some places to a height of twenty or thirty feet. Not a human habitation was within a couple of miles of the Devil's Punch-Bowl in those days; lonely, sombre, and ravine-like, even in the day-time its aspect inspired gloomy thoughts in the breast of the most daring traveller; and as the stage-coaches wound their way about the semi-circumference which the road occupied—as if passing along the rim of a tremendous basin—the voices of the passengers would be suddenly hushed and they would look forth from the windows of the vehicles, with a kind of superstitious awe, into the

depth or far across the yawning abyss into which the steeds, if they took fright, might plunge the whole equipage.

Yes—with superstitious awe, we say: because many, and often fearful, were the tales which were told of deeds of violence committed in that place,—robberies and murders—rapes upon poor benighted female wanderers—and infanticides perpetrated by unmarried mothers who would travel thither from distances even of many miles in order to dispose of the living evidences of their shame. There were histories of terrible accidents told, too, concerning the Devil's Punch-Bowl,—how coaches had been precipitated into the abyss—how poor pedlars, ignorant of the gulf that lay beyond the low embankment, had stepped over it in the depth of night, with the idea of snatching a few hours' repose in a fresh green field, and had thus fallen into the eternal sleep of death—and how horses had stumbled and gone down with their riders to the bottom of the infernal pit!

Many, and varied, and horrible, therefore, were the legends belonging to the Devil's Punch-Bowl;—and superstition had not failed to lend its aid in order to enhance the terrors of the place. In the deep midnight, it was said, strange and spectral forms were seen hovering on the brink of the abyss, or moving about in its vast depths,—shapes so grim and hideous that they would exist ever after in the memories of those who beheld them, as vividly as if impressed with red-hot searing iron on the brain,—terrible apparitions, to gaze on which only for a single instant were to unnerve the bravest man until the last moment of his existence. Nor was this all. For the same superstition which propagated those tales, likewise declared that once in every year—on a certain day—or rather, at deep midnight—the Enemy of Mankind himself and all his crew held their infernal orgies at that place. Then—while the moon veiled herself with the murky clouds and the stars sank shudderingly behind the sable pall of darkness—while the wind moaned, and the owl hooted, and the furze rustled ominously—and while the wings of the bat whirred through the intense darkness,—then, in the midst of one of the long, long nights of winter, would Satan and his fiends assemble round the hollow to enjoy their hellish revel. And it was said that, when the Arch-Demon waved his mighty wand, a spring of pitchy blackness would issue forth from the bottom of the ravine; and higher—and higher—and higher would swell the sable tide, till it reached the brim,—so that the denizens of Satan's Kingdom, thus gathered there in awful congress, might quaff deep draughts of the infernal nectar, whose taste was of human blood! Nay, more—so minutely had superstition elaborated all the grim details of the tremendous orgie, that it forgot not to declare how the cups whence the fiends drank were made of dead men's skulls—how the revellers danced frantically round and round their vast punch-bowl, uttering hideous cries and shouts of maniac laughter—and how the whole terrible phantasmagoria disappeared suddenly, melting into thin air, the moment the cock crew at the first glimmering of dawn.

But taking all these tales and legends for what they are worth, the huge hollow which we have attempted to describe was in sooth a sinister-looking, murderous, cut-throat place.

It was on the fourth evening after the incidents related in the previous chapter, that the Magsman muffled up in his great rough coat, and grasping his club, began to clamber down the steep sides of the Devil's Punch-Bowl.

The clock of the nearest village had struck nine as he passed it some twenty minutes previously: the sky was heavy with dark clouds, which were however broken sufficiently to allow the moon to send her beams faintly forth;—and the wind was rustling amidst the furze to which the Magsman clung as he lowered himself into the yawning abyss.

Soon afterwards another individual, who had approached the hollow from a different direction, began to descend into it: then, in less than ten minutes, a third—a fourth—a fifth—and a sixth,—all coming from separate quarters and at short intervals,—hurried downward to the same point.

At last the whole six met at the bottom of the abyss; and six greater villains had assuredly never assembled before in so appropriate a spot, or in any place with so suitable a name.

The first, as already stated, was Joe the Magsman: then there were Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand;—and the party was made up by two other men of an equally desperate character.

"Well, here we are punctual, according to the appointment made the night before last in London," said Warren, throwing himself upon the ground, the others following his example. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather tired—after my day's walk. Twenty-five miles I've done since breakfast this morning."

"But you ain't too tired to act, though," observed Dick the Tramper.

"I should rather think not indeed," returned the Magsman. "There's something I'm about to pour down my throat that would enable me to face and fight the devil himself."

"Ah! that's brandy you mean," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand. "So much the better. I've got my flask filled to. Does anybody want some?"

It appeared that each individual was equally well furnished; and so the offer was declined.

"Now do you know exactly, old feller," demanded Miles the Buzgloak of the Magsman, "at what o'clock we may expect the jarvey to pass along the road?"

"Why, at about twelve, I should say—certainly not sooner," was the reply.

"Yes—but how do you judge?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand. "Because we know nothink at all about it."

"You've just the same means of judging, as I have," returned the Magsman savagely.

"And how's that?"

"Why—by knowing at what o'clock the jarvey was to leave London this morning, to be sure. Take that time first of all—next you know how many miles the Punch-Bowl is from town—and then you may reckon that the rattle-trap jogs on at about six miles an hour: well—that shows you that we may expect it between twelve and one."

"Quite right, Mr. Warren," said the Kinchin-Grand. "And so we have time to smoke our pipes and rest ourselves a bit. Well—that's a comfort: for we've all walked pretty decently yesterday and to-day—'specially each one taking a different direction, though all coming at last to the same point."

"Ah! the Government little thinks what kind of

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chaps its people will have to deal with, to-night," observed Dick the Tramper. "There can't be a suspicion of what's going to take place: 'cos there's only eight in the secret—and six on us is here."

"Eight!" ejaculated the Kinchin-Grand. "Who's the other two?"

"Why, the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll, to be sure," replied the Tramper.

"Oh! ah! I forgot the women," said the Kinchin-Grand, lighting his pipe. "By the bye, Mr. Warren, you talked just now about fighting Old Nick: do you know that they say he has his boozings here once in every year—and a precious set out it is too, by all accounts."

"Why! I'm blowed if you don't half believe it!" exclaimed the Magsman, who was likewise puffing a short clay filled with very strong tobacco.

"No—I'll be hanged if I do," answered the Kinchin-Grand: "or else I wouldn't be here to-night. What I undertakes, I likes to go through with; and as I shouldn't go through with this here affair if I was afeard, I shouldn't have undertook it in that case. But, I say, are we all armed as agreed upon the night afore last?"

"A pair o' pistols and a stout club for each individual?" added Miles the Buzgloak.

The responses were satisfactory on this head; and the men continued to chatter, smoke, and drink until the Magsman's watch, being consulted by means of placing the glowing bowl of his pipe near the dial so as to throw the light upon it, informed the company that it was verging rapidly upon twelve.

"Now, then, my lads," exclaimed Joe Warren; "we must prepare for action. Put away your pipes—take another swill at the bingo-flask—and follow me."

The night, as it deepened, had grown more gloomy and menacing: but still the storm with

which the clouds seemed laden, burst not forth—and still from between the black masses piled one above another on the face of heaven, the straggling rays of the moon peeped timidly forth. The wind had risen to a somewhat higher key—and the air was intensely cold: but the ruffians, heated as they were with brandy and excited by the object which they had in view, felt not its chilling influence. Silently they now pursued their way, the Magsman acting as captain and as guide; and as those six forms moved from the bottom of the Punch-Bowl towards the acclivity on the summit of which the main road ran, they appeared to be fiends of darkness in the faint and uncertain light of the moon.

On gaining the top, or brim, of the vast hollow, the party was divided into two sections. Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand were ordered by the Magsman to conceal themselves amidst the furze which the low embankment overlooked; while Joe Warren himself, accompanied by the two men completing the band, crossed the road and ascended the portion of the hill which commanded the route.

Being thus disposed of, the ruffians lay in wait patiently and silently.

At length the rumbling of wheels and the noise of horses' hoofs met their ears. They all listened attentively: the sounds came from that quarter whence they were expected;—and there could be no doubt that this was the vehicle whose presence was the object of the night's adventure.

In a few moments two lights, glancing like meteors, began to emerge as it were from the obscurity; and the progress of the carriage along the road on the brim of the Punch-Bowl was thus marked by its lanterns.

On came the vehicle: and now it was near enough for the ruffians who lay in ambush, to observe that it was a long hearse-like concern, drawn by four horses, and with the driver seated on a high box in front.

An escort of four dragoons guarded the ponderous machine—two riding on one side, and two on the other.

In this manner the cavalcade was jogging along, when, all on a sudden, the Magsman leapt from the overhanging hill upon the roof of the vehicle; and, hurling the driver from his seat into the middle of the road, he sprang upon the back of one of the wheel-horses, and cut all the traces in a moment.

At the same instant that the Magsman thus took the initiative, his two companions threw themselves from the overhanging eminence upon the couple of dragoons who rode on that side of the vehicle: while the two mounted soldiers riding on the other side were as suddenly assailed by the Buzgloak, the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand.

Shots were fired—and a severe conflict took place.

Away sped the four horses which the Magsman had freed from the vehicle: frightened by the report of the pistols, they galloped along the road, their thundering hoofs raising every echo in that vast abyss the brim of which the terrified animals were thus madly skirting.

But all that we have as yet described was the work of scarcely a minute; and the proceedings of the Magsman were executed with wondrous rapidity.

Having cut the traces and thus rendered the vehicle stationary by emancipating the horses, this desperate individual passed like lightning underneath the ponderous machine; and with one blow of his club he knocked off a massive padlock which fastened a door at the back of the huge hearse-like carriage.

The vehicle instantaneously vomited forth its contents in the shape of a dozen convicts, heavily ironed; and amidst the very foremost, the Magsman had the satisfaction of recognising, by the flickering moonlight, the countenances of his friends Briggs and the Big Beggarman.

Meantime the four dragoons and the five villains opposed to them had maintained a desperate struggle on either side of the vehicle: but the release of the convicts decided the fortune of the fray in a very few moments. The soldiers were made prisoners without any loss of life; and they, as well as the driver of the van, were bound securely with strong cords and deposited, powerless, beneath the overhanging hill.

Then, in the sheer spirit of wanton mischief, the whole gang of desperadoes—liberators as well as convicts—seized upon the carriage—wheeled it to the edge of the Punch-Bowl—and hurled it over the low embankment into the abyss.

Down—down thundered the ponderous machine, rolling over and over with rapid concussions that sounded like the sharp and successive reports of a brisk cannonade: down—down it went, tearing away furze, brambles, and rank grass,—and ultimately dashing to pieces at the bottom of the Punch-Bowl.

Satisfied with the work of destruction, and tauntingly wishing the four dragoons and the driver a good night, the party hastened away from the scene of this exploit; and having gained a neighbouring wood, the Magsman produced a quantity of files and pick-locks from one of his capacious pockets. By means of these implements the convicts soon removed their fetters; and we need hardly observe that great was their joy at this triumphant and unexpected deliverance—for not even the Beggarman and Briggs had been previously aware of their friends' determination to attempt their rescue.

CHAPTER LXIX.

PAULINE AND GABRIEL.

It was eleven o'clock on Sunday morning; and Pauline Clarendon was seated alone in a small parlour at the house which her father had taken about five weeks previously in Cavendish Square.

The young lady was dressed in an elegant but unassuming style; and the dark colour of her gown set off to the utmost advantage her pure and stainless complexion. Her deep brown hair, so rich with its natural gloss, showered in a myriad ringlets over her well-shaped shoulders; and her neck, grandly white and gently arching, resembled a polished ivory pillar against that flood of luxuriant curls which swept her back.

Upon her countenance a soft melancholy rested: and, although the light of heaven appeared to illume the depths of her eloquent blue eyes, yet her features expressed a certain pensiveness which imparted to her entire appearance an ineffably charming air of reflective sweetness.

From the reverie into which the lovely girl had fallen, she was presently aroused by a double knock at the front door; and starting from her seat, she threw a glance at the mirror over the mantel-piece. A smile of satisfaction played for a moment upon

her lips—for the faithful glass, reflecting her beauteous countenance, told her that she was charming: then, ashamed at the feeling of vanity to which she had thus yielded for an instant, she returned to her chair—her features at the same time assuming a somewhat severe expression.

But, oh! for Pauline to wear an angry look was not an easy task: it was merely Venus attiring herself in the armour of Minerva;—and though she might fix upon her brow the helmet of the Goddess of War, yet beneath the shade of the vizor those were still the eyes of the Goddess of Love and Beauty which looked forth!

The door opened—and Lord Florimel was announced.

Pauline rose, and proffered him her hand: but when he made a movement to convey it to his lips, she immediately withdrew it—and, indicating a chair, bade him be seated.

"In the first place I thank you, Pauline, for granting me this interview—*at last*," he said, in a tone of soft remonstrance.

"I declined to accompany my father and sister to church, on purpose that I might see you alone," said Pauline. "But I scarcely know why we should have met at all—since we must part presently to encounter each other no more save upon terms of mere acquaintanceship."

"And yet it is hard that I should be condemned for a crime of which I am totally innocent," observed Florimel, with a voice and manner expressive of vexation. "As God is my judge——"

"Add not perjury to your other offences, Gabriel," interrupted Pauline. "And now give me your attention. That I have loved you well—fondly—sincerely," she continued in a tremulous tone, "you are aware: but I am not so weak and silly a girl as to espouse a man whose infidelities will render me wretched. I appreciate all the honour which you—a great nobleman—did me at the time by the offer of your hand; and your conduct was the more generous, inasmuch as I was then in a far humbler situation than at present. Had you remained faithful to me, Gabriel," she proceeded, the pearly tears now trickling down her beauteous cheeks, "I should have esteemed myself the happiest woman in the world; and, on becoming your wife, my whole and sole care would have been to convince you that I was worthy of your affection. I do not say that I should have given you a love greater than any which human heart ever knew before: but certainly it would have been outrivalled by no devotion of which woman is capable. Bright and glorious, Gabriel, were the fairy scenes of happiness which my imagination had woven; and in that wild and romantic castle-building my soul was steeped in a fount of indescribable bliss. But gone are those visions—vanished are those sweet dreams; and all is a dreary waste where the gorgeous structures raised by my fervent fancy so lately stood. We shall part—but on my side it will be in sorrow, and not with anger. I give you back your vows and pledges—I release you from all your solemn promises—in the same way that you must emancipate me from mine."

And, as Pauline uttered these last words, she averted her countenance to hide the tears that were now streaming down it.

"My God! are things so serious as this?" exclaimed Florimel, cruelly tortured. "I have listened to you, my beloved Pauline—not with patience—but in respectful silence; and now I implore you to give an attentive ear to me in my turn. Interrupt me not, therefore, when I take God to witness that you have wronged me with your suspicions—that, although circumstances were against me and appearances unfavourable——"

"Oh! if I could only be convinced of the truth of this assertion!" ejaculated Pauline, looking up and smiling through her tears.

It was Venus laying aside the martial sternness of Minerva, and becoming the Goddess of Love and Beauty once again!

"Yes—I *can* convince you—I *will* convince you!" said the young nobleman; and, taking a letter from his pocket, he handed it to Pauline, saying, "The girl whom you encountered as she issued from my house, was the bearer of that missive!"

Miss Clarendon cast her eyes over the billet, and read the contents as follow:—

"What think you, my dear friend, of the bearer of this? You are a naughty man for not coming to see me. Pray explain this absence of several days—not by letter, but in person. I shall expect you to sup with me on any evening you may choose to appoint; and if it be agreeable to you, I can promise that the bearer, Miss Camilla Morton, shall be of the party. All that you need now say to her is that you will attend to the note."

"Ah! Florimel, I have indeed wronged you!" exclaimed Pauline, throwing herself into his arms, and weeping upon his bosom. "I now perceive that the young woman was a stranger to you—that she was sent by some vile person to tempt you—— But wherefore did you not give me this explanation at first?" she demanded, the thought suddenly striking her: and, withdrawing her arms from about his neck, she gazed anxiously—almost searchingly—upon his countenance.

"Will you not at once banish this unpleasant incident from your mind, dearest Pauline—without asking me for any farther explanations?" said Florimel, his voice and manner alike denoting that he was now troubled and embarrassed.

"If you love me, Gabriel," she answered, in a tone of mild reproach, "you will completely and fully relieve my mind from any disagreeable impressions which remain upon it. Once more, then, do I ask you why you did not at once forward me this note, to convince me that the young person whom I encountered was a stranger, and not a familiar acquaintance?"

"Pauline, I will be candid with you," returned the nobleman, taking a seat upon a sofa and compelling her to place herself by his side: "I was afraid you would recognise the handwriting in that note."

"I never saw it before," said Pauline, snatching up the billet from the table where she had flung it, and studying it with attention.

"So much the better," exclaimed Florimel. "And now ask me nothing more, I beseech you."

"This mystery distracts me!" cried the young lady. "If you have done naught of which you are ashamed, why shroud a portion of the incident in so suspicious a secrecy? Tell me everything, I conjure you! And first, wherefore should you have fancied that I might recognise the handwriting?"

"Because I feared—I dreaded——that is, I thought it probable that the person who penned this

note might have had occasion at some time to write to your sister," said Florimel, cruelly embarrassed.

"Write to my sister!" ejaculated Pauline, in amazement. "Surely you cannot fancy that so vile a woman as the authoress of this letter must be, could hold any correspondence with Octavia? O Gabriel! It is not because my sister has shown every proof of confidence towards him whom she loves—it is not because she is already his wife in the eyes of heaven, though not in the estimation of the world, that you should think so injuriously of her!"

"No—no—I was mistaken—I was wrong!" cried Florimel. "And now let us change the discourse, my beloved Pauline——"

"We cannot abandon the topic in its present state," said Miss Clarendon, firmly. "Who is the woman that wrote this letter, and whom you suspected to be in communication with Octavia?"

"I dare not—must not——" stammered Florimel, with increasing embarrassment.

"Oh! a light breaks in upon me!" suddenly ejaculated Pauline. "It is at the house of Mrs. Brace, the milliner, that Octavia meets her lover —— and you are in Mrs. Brace's confidence——you told Octavia so when you accompanied her home on that memorable morning —— Yes—everything confirms my suspicions——and it is this same Mrs. Brace who is the vile authoress of that most vile letter! My God! what will become of poor Octavia? She is deceived —— I can read it all ——"

And, covering her face with her hands, Pauline wept bitterly.

"What have I done?—what mischief have I made?" cried Florimel, starting from his seat, and beginning to pace to and fro in an agitated manner. "To set myself right with you, Pauline, I have engendered the most terrible suspicions in your mind ——"

"It was my fault, Gabriel—dear Gabriel!" she exclaimed, springing towards him and throwing her arms about his neck. "Yes—it was my fault," she continued, in a voice broken with deep sobs: "I compelled you to speak out—I extracted the truth from you——and I appreciate all the delicacy which prompted you to remain silent —— Oh! my poor Octavia—I fear that you are deceived—betrayed—lost—undone: for no honourable man could place the woman whom he intends to make his wife in contact with a wretch so vile as this Mrs. Brace!"

And Pauline sank, convulsed with grief, upon the sofa.

"Tranquillise yourself, my beloved—in the name of God! tranquillise yourself," said Florimel, adopting his most soothing tone. "All may not be so bad as you fancy —— Octavia's intended husband may not be acquainted with the real character of this Mrs. Brace——And remember, dearest, that amongst men the milliner's private avocation is not looked upon ——"

"Do not advance anything in extenuation of the wicked woman," interrupted Pauline, with impassioned tone and manner. "I will forget that *you* ever knew her—that *you* ever made her services available to your own purposes: for that such has been the case, is too evident, Gabriel ——Nevertheless, all *that* shall be forgotten, I say, if you will now lend me your assistance on behalf of my poor deluded sister. And remember, dear Gabriel," continued the sweet girl, in a tone of earnest entreaty,—"remember that when you become *my* husband, Octavia is thereby made *your* sister also—and as a brother you must be jealous of her honour. To her father—her natural protecter—all this unhappy business cannot be made known: but as you are already well acquainted with every detail—indeed, as it was from your own lips that I received the first hint respecting Octavia's love and the connexion which she had formed so hastily—it is for *you* to unravel the whole, and ascertain who this Mr. Harley really is."

"Mr. Harley!—is that the name?" inquired Florimel, who now heard it for the first time; and at the same instant he recollected having been informed by Mrs. Brace that Octavia's lover was a man of rank and shortly to be married, but that he had not the slightest intention of espousing the elder Miss Clarendon.

"Yes—his name is Harley," repeated Pauline. "But I will show you a portrait which bears the most striking resemblance to him—for I myself have seen this Mr. Harley, and I can vouch for the marvellous accuracy of the likeness."

Thus speaking, the young lady wiped away her tears; and, opening a portfolio which lay upon the table, she displayed to the view of the astounded Lord Florimel the portrait of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

For nearly a minute the young nobleman gazed in speechless wonderment upon the print: but at length raising his eyes, and turning them slowly towards Pauline, he was shocked to perceive that her countenance was ghastly pale—that her looks were wild and haggard—and that the colour had even fled from those lips which, naturally of such a delicious coral were now almost as white as the pearls beneath.

"My God! what is the matter?" exclaimed Florimel, extending his arms towards her;—and she sank, suddenly convulsed with sobs, upon his bosom.

He seated himself on a chair—he took her upon his knees—he strained her passionately in a fond embrace—he kissed away the tears that now rained down her cheeks, to which the excitement of bitter anguish brought back a crimson glow.

"Sweetest—dearest Pauline," he murmured in her ears,—"tranquillise yourself, I implore you! Never—never did I love you so ardently—so sincerely—so devotedly, as at this moment. My God! tell me what I can do for you, angelic girl: but dry those tears—subdue these rending sobs, I conjure—I entreat you! Yes—I will behave as a brother towards Octavia—because it now rests with yourself when I shall demand *your* hand of Mr. Clarendon and lead you to the altar. As your husband, Pauline, I shall acquire the right to vindicate the honour of Octavia;—and you have only to breathe your commands, in order to see them executed!"

"Gabriel, your words console me—and these generous assurances which they convey render me as proud of you as I was already fond," said Pauline, of her own accord approaching her lips to his own and returning the fervent kisses which he imprinted thereon: then, gently disengaging herself from his embrace, and taking a seat by his side,—but placing one of her fair hands in familiar and artless confidence upon his shoulder,—she observed, while passing her handkerchief across her eyes, "You have now seen the portrait of Octavia's lover; and if Mr. Harley be not the Prince of Wales himself, then never was resemblance more wonderful."

"I am astonished—bewildered!" exclaimed Flo-

rimel, really uncertain to what opinion he should fix his belief. "But there are strange likenesses in the world," he said, in a musing tone; "and that recent trial of which Sir Richard Stamford appeared as a prosecutor or a witness——"

"I have thought of the same incident," observed Pauline; "and sometimes I have fancied that Octavia's lover may be the Prince—at others that he is this very Sir Richard Stamford—and then again that he is the Mr. Harley whom he represents himself——But *you*, Gabriel," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, and speaking with animation, "will clear up this mystery?"

"Give me your commands, my beloved—and I will execute them," said Florimel, who, in the enthusiasm of the adoration which he now experienced towards the charming Pauline, was prepared to go through fire and water to serve her.

"I must tell you, Gabriel," she resumed, fixing upon him a look of the tenderest gratitude, "that Octavia is herself oppressed with serious misgivings on the point which we are discussing. She strives to conceal them, poor girl—she buoys herself up with hope to the extent of her powers; and she does not dare trust her tongue to reveal all her doubts, and fears, and suspicions to me. But, alas! I can read the nature of her thoughts—and I know that there are times when she is unhappy—very unhappy. For her sake, Gabriel, must we at once devise the means to clear up the mystery which surrounds Mr. Harley——"

"Frankly—candidly—unreservedly do I now tell you, my beloved," interrupted the young nobleman, "that I do not believe this Mr. Harley is the person he represents himself to be. You place such implicit reliance upon me, that I should be unworthy of your love and your confidence if I did not manifest the same ingenuousness towards you. So noble is your nature, that you compel me to view duplicity and deceit with abhorrence; and I declare most solemnly that I will henceforth yield to that benign influence which your own character sheds upon me."

"Gabriel, I adore you!" exclaimed Pauline, throwing herself once more into his arms and embracing him affectionately. "However wild your past life may have been—however deeply you have plunged into pleasure and dissipation—your conduct of this morning is an atonement for it all! Yes—I adore you, Gabriel: for now you are worthy of that immense love which I devote and dedicate to you—and to you alone!"

"And may my right hand wither, Pauline, when I deceive you!" cried the impassioned Gabriel, as he covered her blushing countenance with kisses.

"We understand each other better now than ever," whispered the amiable girl; "and if the sincerest affection which woman's heart can pour forth be capable of ensuring man's felicity, then that affection is yours and that happiness is within your reach."

"Oh! what sacred power—what holy influence does a virtuous woman possess over the heart of the sterner sex!" exclaimed Florimel, with the most unfeigned enthusiasm. "Henceforth I abjure all those pursuits which once gave me pleasure, but on which I now look with ineffable disgust; and for the future my Pauline's bright example shall be my guiding star. Yes—lovely, angelic being—I am thine—wholly and solely thine; and there shall not exist a secret between us."

"Were it not on account of my poor sister, I should be the happiest woman on the face of the earth," said the beautiful girl, as she resumed her place by her lover's side. "But, alas!" she added, in a different tone and with overclouding countenance,—"you ere now gave utterance to words which have almost confirmed my previous suspicion that Octavia is ruined—lost—betrayed irremediably! Tell me, Gabriel—tell me—do you know aught of this Mr. Harley?"

"Listen to me, my angel—and prepare to hear evil intelligence," said the young nobleman, taking one of her fair hands and pressing it between both his own. "I know this much—that Mr. Harley is a man of rank, and that so far from entertaining honourable intentions towards your sister, he is engaged to be married to another."

"He is a man of rank," murmured Pauline, in a faint tone: "and that rank——"

"Has never been revealed to me," was the prompt reply.

"I shall no longer give way to grief," said the young lady, her countenance suddenly assuming a determined expression, although still retaining all the feminine sweetness that was natural to it. "You and I, Gabriel, must now work in Octavia's interest, but unknown to her;"—then, after a moment's reflection, she rose—fetched a newspaper from an adjoining room—and, returning to her seat, observed, as she pointed to a paragraph in one of the columns of the print, "This journal of yesterday announces that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will give a grand entertainment to-morrow evening."

"To which I have received an invitation, through the interest of her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire, who is my cousin," said Florimel. "I have never yet had the honour of being presented to the heir-apparent; and it was therefore my intention to avail myself of the opportunity of visiting Carlton House to-morrow evening."

"And I shall accompany you, Gabriel," returned Pauline, in a decided tone.

"Would that I had the power to make you my companion!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "I should indeed be proud of you, my angel: and when you are Lady Florimel, the doors of Carlton House will be open to you. But the etiquette of those princely saloons is so rigid—so strict—so exclusive——"

"I will obtain an invitation," said Pauline. "Do you not think that Lord Marchmont can accomplish this much for me? If so, my cousin, the Hon. Arthur Eaton will prevail upon his father to interest himself in my behalf."

"I fear that you will be disappointed in that quarter, dearest," answered Florimel. "Lord Marchmont is a Tory—and the Tories, you must know, have not the slightest influence at Carlton House. But—a thought strikes me! Come with me to Devonshire House—I have the *entrée* even at this early hour—and I will introduce you to the Duchess as my intended bride. Her Grace will perhaps undertake to *chaperon* you to-morrow evening."

"A thousand thanks, dear Gabriel! In five minutes I shall be ready to accompany you."

And thus speaking, the beautiful girl tripped lightly from the room.

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CHAPTER LXX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

The church-clocks were striking twelve as Lord Florimel handed Miss Pauline Clarendon into his carriage which was waiting at the door; and he ordered the coachman to drive to Devonshire House, Piccadilly.

Away started the splendid equipage; and the young nobleman felt proud and happy in having so charming and amiable a companion. On her side, Pauline was so profoundly touched by the frank and candid behaviour of her lover during the conversation which had so recently passed between them, that her happiness would have been complete, had not the position of her sister become so serious a cause of affliction.

In due time the carriage stopped in front of Devonshire House; and the hall-porter, who answered the summons given by one of Lord Florimel's footmen, said that her Grace was at home.

The young nobleman assisted Pauline to alight; and they were conducted up a magnificent staircase, into a small but elegantly furnished room, where the Duchess of Devonshire, attired in a graceful *dishabillée*, was half reclining on a sofa placed so that she might catch the warmth of the cheerful fire which blazed on the hearth.

Florimel was a great favourite with the Duchess; and she received him with all the cordial familiarity of a relative. In a becoming manner and suitable terms he presented Miss Pauline Clarendon, with the delicate intimation that she was shortly to become Lady Florimel; and the Duchess, taking the young maiden's hand, addressed her with so much affability and graceful courtesy that she was instantly relieved of any embarrassment she had at first experienced on finding herself in the presence of that brilliant leader of the fashionable world.

"It is very amiable of your Grace to receive us at this unseasonable hour," said Florimel: "and an apology is necessary on my part——"

"Not at all, Gabriel," interrupted the Duchess. "You are always welcome—and doubly so this morning, inasmuch as you have brought so interesting a companion. But in the same friendly and unceremonious manner that I now receive you both, must I inform you that I have only a quarter of an hour to devote to you on this occasion: for at one o'clock her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough will be here."

"We will not intrude many minutes upon you, my charming and amiable cousin," said Florimel. "In fact, I have a little favour to ask you——"

"If you mean that I must be present on a certain day," exclaimed the Duchess, with a smile of enchanting archness, "and that I must keep myself disengaged for a particular ceremony, rest assured that I shall experience great pleasure in accepting the invitation. I hope you intend to make my volatile cousin quite steady, Miss Clarendon?"

"I assuredly hope that the hint contained in the words of your Grace will not be thrown away upon his lordship," answered Pauline, smiling: "and I may add that I have the fullest and most implicit confidence in him."

"You will make a very interesting pair—and I long to see you both standing at the altar," said the Duchess. "Indeed, you and I, Miss Clarendon, must become very good friends. In the course of the ensuing week I shall be receiving company; and I shall expect the pleasure of numbering yourself and sister amongst my guests."

"Then your Grace is aware that Miss Pauline has an elder sister?" observed Florimel.

"Mr. Eaton called upon me yesterday," responded the Duchess; "and he was enthusiastic in describing and praising his two charming cousins. You therefore perceive, Miss Clarendon, that I was prepossessed in your favour before I experienced the pleasure of knowing you."

"The kindness with which your Grace has received me, will never be forgotten," observed Pauline. "But I am fearful that our visit has already been prolonged——"

And she glanced significantly towards Lord Florimel.

"I will at once explain the favour which I have to solicit at your hands, dear cousin," said the young nobleman, addressing the Duchess. "It was not precisely to ask your Grace to honour our bridal-day with your presence: although we should not have omitted that invitation—and now we consider your Grace pledged to accept it. But my Pauline is very anxious to attend the Prince's ball to-morrow evening——"

"And nothing would have afforded me greater pleasure than to introduce her," interrupted the Duchess: "but it is unfortunately impossible—inasmuch as the ball is preceded by a dinner-party, to which I am honoured with an invitation. On the next occasion, however, Miss Clarendon may hold me engaged to act the agreeable part of *chaperon*."

Pauline was about to express her thanks for this promise so affably and readily given, when the door was thrown open—and a footman announced her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough.

But what pen can describe the amazement—what language can convey an idea of the astonishment of Pauline Clarendon, when in these ladies she recognised the *Mrs. Mordaunt* and the *Mrs. Smith* whom she had encountered on an occasion well remembered by the reader.

The Princess Sophia did not immediately notice the young lady—because she was at once accosted by the Duchess of Devonshire, who hastened to conduct her to a seat: but Eleanor instantaneously beheld and recognised Pauline—and, though for one moment completely astounded, yet in the next she recovered her presence of mind, and, with admirable tact, approached her, saying, "My dear Miss Clarendon, I am rejoiced to meet you again. I hope that my friend Octavia is as well as your own appearance proves *you* to be?"

Pauline murmured a few scarcely intelligible words in reply: for the sense of amazement had taken so strong a hold upon her that she could not immediately shake it off. But she felt the Countess press with an unmistakable significancy the hand which her ladyship had taken in her own; and raising her eyes, Pauline threw upon her a look which, though rapid, conveyed the assurance that "*the secret was safe with her.*"

"I am delighted that we have thus met, Miss Clarendon," continued Eleanor, repeating the young lady's name louder than before, so that it might reach the Princess and make her Royal Highness aware who was present.

And as that name struck the ears of the frail daughter of George the Third, she gave so sudden a start and turned so ashy pale, that the Duchess of Devonshire exclaimed, "Good heavens! your Royal Highness is unwell!"

At these words, Lord Florimel sprang towards the bell-pull to summon assistance: but the Princess, instantaneously recovering her presence of mind by one of those almost superhuman efforts of which we mortals are sometimes capable in pressing emergencies, stopped the young nobleman with her own hand—saying, "It is nothing—a sudden indisposition seized upon me: but it has passed."

"Are you sure that you feel better, my dearest friend?" inquired the Countess of Desborough, hastily accosting the Princess Sophia. "Oh! I am well aware that your Royal Highness is subject to these sudden and evanescent attacks ——"

"Thank you for your kind solicitude, my dear Eleanor," said the Princess: "I can assure you that the faintness—the giddiness—which seized upon me, has totally passed."

And, as she uttered these words, she darted a significant look upon the Countess, to imply that her presence of mind was completely restored.

Eleanor now returned to Pauline, who was standing at a little distance;—and, taking the young lady's hand, she said in a low and rapid whisper, "You must be presented as if you had never seen the Princess before:"—then, leading her towards Sophia, she exclaimed, "Permit me to introduce to your Royal Highness a much esteemed and amiable friend of mine—Miss Pauline Clarendon."

"Every friend of yours, Eleanor, is welcome to me," said the Princess Sophia, receiving Pauline with a more than ordinary condescension and graceful affability; although the colour came and went in rapid transitions upon the cheeks of the very handsome but frail and dishonoured daughter of George the Third.

Lord Florimel was likewise presented to the Princess, and then to the Countess, with whom he was previously unacquainted — the Duchess of Devonshire performing this ceremony for her noble cousin; and the conversation turned upon the grand entertainment which the Prince of Wales was to give on the following evening.

"I am glad this subject has been mentioned," observed the Duchess of Devonshire, who, in spite of her levity, was excessively good-natured, and who had taken a great fancy to Pauline: "because," she continued, "Miss Clarendon is anxious to be present at his Royal Highness's ball—and I am unable to introduce her, inasmuch as I am honoured by an invitation to dine with his Royal Highness and Mrs. Fitzherbert. But you, my dear Eleanor," she added, turning towards the Countess of Desborough, "will perhaps take charge of our young friend, who, I may observe, is shortly to become Lady Florimel."

"I should be delighted to present Miss Clarendon to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales," said the Countess: "but circumstances, I fear, will prevent me from accepting the invitation with which I have been honoured."

"Indeed, my dear Eleanor," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "you must over-rule any circumstances which threaten to keep you away from my royal brother's entertainment to-morrow evening. I shall be there—and it will prove a great disappointment to me if I do not meet you on this occasion at Carlton House. I shall even consider it unkind towards myself if you remain absent."

"And I, too," said the Duchess of Devonshire, "shall be grieved if I do not meet you to-morrow evening, Eleanor. You must positively renounce any other engagement which you may have formed."

It was with no small degree of difficulty that the Countess of Desborough concealed her vexation at being thus pressed: for, as the reader may easily conceive, she had her own private motives for not wishing to attend the heir-apparent's ball, nor indeed even to come in contact with his Royal Highness again. The conversation which she had overheard between him and the Magsman had filled her with loathing, indignation, and aversion for that princely voluptuary: and any tenderness of feeling which she might at one moment have experienced towards him, had been changed by a deeper reading of his character into abhorrence and disgust.

But the Princess Sophia—not suspecting that her friend had any private motive of dislike with regard to the Prince of Wales, and anxious by any means to conciliate and please the young lady who was the depositress of her own tremendous secret—continued to urge the point relative to the invitation to Carlton House, with a zeal and earnestness which amounted almost to a command and rendered a refusal impossible.

"Yes, my dear Eleanor, you must go—and Miss Clarendon will then be enabled to accompany you," said the Princess. "Were it not inconsistent with the prevailing etiquette, I would myself introduce Miss Clarendon."

And as she uttered these words, the Princess Sophia threw a look full of deep meaning upon Pauline—as much as to say, "Keep my secret faithfully—and I will prove your friend in all things."

The result of so much pressing on the part of her Royal Highness and the Duchess of Devonshire, was that Eleanor was compelled to yield;—and, in thus yielding, she was also under the necessity of offering to act as *chaperon* for Miss Pauline Clarendon on the occasion. It was consequently arranged that Pauline should repair to Desborough House in Berkeley Square at nine o'clock on the following evening, and thence accompany the Countess to the palatial residence of the Prince of Wales.

This matter being settled, to the great delight of the young lady, she and Florimel took their leave.

When they were once more alone together in the carriage, and as they were whirling back to Cavendish Square, Florimel said, "And now, my beloved Pauline, you have gained your point most effectually; and to-morrow evening I shall have the pleasure of dancing with you at Carlton House. But what excuse will you make to your father and sister for having accompanied me in my carriage this morning?—and upon what pretext will you be enabled to leave the house in ball-room costume to-morrow evening?"

"My dear Gabriel," replied Pauline, "when we reach Cavendish Square presently, you must demand a private interview with my father, and inform him that you have honoured me by a proposal, an

that you have been referred to him. Will you do this?"

"I am rejoiced that I have received your permission to take this step," answered the young nobleman, pressing her hand tenderly. "Mr. Clarendon will not then think it strange that you should have consented to take a drive—round the park shall we say?—in my carriage."

"When he sees that your intentions are honourable, my Gabriel," responded Pauline, "he will not allude to the circumstance. With regard to the affair of to-morrow evening, my father fortunately dines out—and I shall not be at a loss to invent some excuse to satisfy Octavia. Indeed, I will tell her that I am to accompany you to the Opera—and you must call for me in your carriage at twenty minutes to nine. You can then put me down at Desborough House in Berkeley Square."

"All this shall be attended to, my beloved," said Florimel.

"And now, Gabriel," resumed the young maiden, gazing tenderly upon him,—"you must not imagine that because I am so ready in devising the means to lull my sister's suspicions asleep to-morrow evening, and mislead her as to the real place and object of my visit,—you must not imagine, I say, that duplicity is no stranger to me——"

"I would not wrong you thus grossly!" exclaimed Florimel, in an impassioned tone. "I know you to be innocence itself—I am aware of the motives which prompt you to visit Carlton House to-morrow evening—and your sisterly feelings render you all the more estimable in my eyes. Your conduct, my Pauline, on the first occasion of our acquaintance, has taught me to admire—love—and respect you," he added, again pressing the hand which he retained in his own.

"And your conduct of this day, Gabriel, has endeared you to me more than I can explain," murmured the beauteous creature, fixing upon him a look full of unutterable feelings.

"It is sweet to be praised by your lips!" exclaimed Florimel, returning that look with one of adoration. "But I must congratulate you, Pauline, on the readiness with which your appearance and manners engage the esteem and friendship of those with whom you come in contact. The Duchess of Devonshire took an immediate fancy to you: the Countess of Desborough greeted you as kindly as if you were her sister;—and the Princess Sophia pleaded most eloquently in your behalf respecting the presentation at the heir-apparent's ball to-morrow night."

Pauline had no time to respond to these observations: for at the moment her lover had done speaking, the carriage stopped in Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE FAIR PATRICIAN AND THE RESUSCITATED.

It was about four o'clock on that Sunday afternoon when the Countess of Desborough returned to her residence in Berkeley Square.

The incidents of the morning had annoyed her; and there was a certain pouting expression upon her coral lips, which, instead of impairing the effect of her loveliness, gave an indescribable charm to her classically chiselled features.

Retiring at once to her own chamber, and dismissing her female attendants the instant they had assisted her to lay aside her bonnet and scarf, she threw herself into an arm-chair and gave way to her reflections.

"To-morrow evening I shall be doomed to meet that despicable voluptuary face to face!"—thus ran the current of her thoughts. "Oh! how my blood boils at the idea of having permitted him to bestow his lustful kisses on my cheeks—my lips! How maddened with rage do I feel at the recollection of that weakness which induced me to assent to admit him to my chamber! But thank God! I escaped his polluted embrace;—and the amour which his infamous pander and assistant, the milliner of Pall Mall, was sent hither to forward and promote, was interrupted at the very moment when *he* stood upon the threshold of success, and *I* on that of shame and degradation. And now—to think that I must appear to-morrow evening in the presence of this man—treat him with the respect due to his princely rank—and receive any courtesy which he may choose to demonstrate towards me! But even *this* I could endure—and I should not be so deeply vexed and troubled now on that account alone. Alas! I foresee that my beloved friend, the Princess Sophia, stands upon an abyss. Her honour is in the keeping of two young ladies——And yet neither Octavia nor Pauline would betray her! No—no: they are good and amiable girls—they will keep her secret. Her secret, indeed! Does not her royal brother know it?—and is he not aware that the child was born at the very house occupied at the time by these young ladies? And one of them is to be presented to him to-morrow night! Poor Sophia! were she aware that her secret was thus known to her eldest brother—the brother of whom she stands most in awe—she would die with grief. Alas! alas! how is all this to end? My soul is filled with gloomy presentiments. Wherefore should Pauline Clarendon be thus anxious to appear at Carlton House? Is it through that curiosity which influences giddy girls?—is it to gratify a mere sentiment of vanity?—or has she a still less worthy motive in view? No—no: she is a good girl, I repeat; and it is natural enough that she should desire to mingle in that bright sphere of fashion to the confines of which she has only been so very lately raised."

Such were the conflicting thoughts and anxieties which swept through the imagination of the Countess of Desborough in the solitude of her own chamber. But her reflections gradually flowed into another channel;—and a voluptuous langour came gradually upon her,—like the softly stealing influence of a dreamy repose in an atmosphere oppressive with mingled sultriness and perfume,—as she murmured the name of *Gustavus Wakefield!*

Then, rising from her seat, she contemplated herself in the full-length mirror which stood near; and as she surveyed her own magnificent form, which was so faithfully reflected on that polished surface, a smile of mingled triumph and joy appeared upon her lips—and then, in another moment, her bosom heaved to the profound sigh that came as it were from the very depths of her soul.

But the influence of her warm and impassioned nature was now upon her;—and, yielding to the

irresistible sway of feelings which she could not control, she proceeded to the drawing-room with the secret hope of finding Ramsey there—*alone!*

Nor was she disappointed: for, the instant she made her appearance, the resuscitated rose from the sofa on which he had been reclining.

This was the sixth day of his sojourn at Desborough House, over the threshold of which he had not once stirred during that interval. Nor had he encountered any of the visitors who happened to call: for, pleading a continued indisposition and likewise a disinclination to mingle in society, he had been permitted to enjoy as complete a seclusion as if he were the master of the mansion and able to act as he chose. His breakfast was served in his own chamber: at mid-day he was wont to repair to the drawing-room, in which the Earl sometimes and the Countess very frequently bore him company;—and with them he had dined every evening since his arrival at the house. With Lord Desborough he was already a great favourite; and in Eleanor's eyes he was the handsomest and most agreeable individual of her acquaintance.

That he was by no means displeasing to the Countess, Ramsey had not failed to observe;—and his profound knowledge of human nature soon convinced him that she was a woman of strong passions. He had likewise perceived that Eleanor and her husband did not occupy the same sleeping-apartment—that, in fact, there was a certain mysterious estrangement between them, resulting from no apparent fault on either side. Vainly did he rack his imagination to conjecture the cause; the circumstance set all his ingenuity at naught;—and the only hypothesis which seemed feasible, was that Eleanor had been unfaithful to her husband—that he had so far forgiven her as to conceal her frailty from the world—but that he could no longer make her the partner of his bed.

And yet when inclining to this belief, Ramsey

was staggered by the fact that Eleanor's deportment towards her husband was not that of a woman conscious of her secret shame: nor was the Earl's behaviour towards her that of a man who had any reason to complain of his wife. On the contrary, he was most tender, affectionate, and devoted with regard to his beautiful Countess; whereas her conduct was somewhat capricious and versatile—at one time reciprocating his love, and at another being characterised by a coldness which she evidently tried to subdue, but could not.

When he reflected upon these circumstances, he could not in any way reconcile them with the supposition he had formed to account for the fact of the Earl and Countess sleeping in separate apartments; and yet in no other manner was he able to find a reason for this singular mode of life which they led. It was strange—most strange, that a man in the prime of his years and a lovely woman of ardent temperament and glowing passions should practise a self-denial as mysterious as it was unnatural.

But we have observed that Ramsey had perceived that he himself was not displeasing to the Countess; and, unmindful of the generous hospitality which he had received and was still receiving at the hands of the Earl of Desborough,—forgetful of his duty towards the nobleman who had promised to become his friend and patron, and who, with the most admirable philanthropy, had undertaken to provide for him in future,—the treacherous guest had already resolved upon the seduction of Eleanor!

With these few observations, we resume the thread of our narrative.

The heart of the Countess of Desborough was beating rapidly, and a rich carnation glow appeared beneath the transparent olive of her cheeks, as she entered the drawing-room where, as she had hoped and anticipated, she found Ramsey alone.

And he failed not to observe that heightening colour and the trepidation of her manner as she advanced across the spacious apartment—her rich dress sweeping the thick carpet on which her elastic steps scarcely left a visible impression.

"Your ladyship took advantage of a day unusually fine at this season of the year," observed Ramsey, as he made a low and graceful bow on accosting the Countess.

"My beloved friend the Princess Sophia sent yesterday to command me to wait upon her at a somewhat early hour in the forenoon to-day," responded Eleanor; "and we paid a visit to the Duchess of Devonshire. But how happens it, Mr. Wakefield, that you have not also availed yourself of this glorious sunshine to breathe the fresh air? A little exercise would have benefitted you after your severe indisposition."

"I feel no inclination to cross the threshold of your ladyship's hospitable mansion," said Ramsey;—"until I leave it altogether," he added, with a half-stifled sigh.

"But you are in no hurry to leave us, Mr. Wakefield!" exclaimed the Countess, with involuntary warmth; and instantaneously perceiving that she had spoken in such a tone, she became scarlet with confusion and embarrassment. "I mean," she accordingly hastened to add, "that until you are perfectly recovered, it is quite unnecessary for you to seek another abode."

"Did I consult my own feelings alone, I should not indeed be precipitate in leaving this friendly home which I so providentially found," observed Ramsey, throwing a certain degree of mournful tenderness into his voice: "but, under circumstances, the sooner I depart——"

And, stopping short, he affected to be seized with a confusion as complete as that which Eleanor had ere now experienced in such reality.

"Has anything occurred to displease you, Mr. Wakefield?" she inquired. "It is the wish of the Earl and of myself that you should receive all possible attention; and if you have sustained any annoyance—any slight—any neglect——"

"My God! I have been treated too well—too kindly," interrupted Ramsay, with enthusiasm; "and my heart abounds in feelings of the most fervent gratitude towards your noble husband and yourself."

"Then wherefore hint so mysteriously that circumstances will compel you to depart soon, Mr. Wakefield?" asked the Countess, in a voice that trembled somewhat, and with a strange fluttering of the heart.

"Did I indeed make such an observation? Then I was wrong—very wrong," exclaimed Ramsey, speaking as if vexed with himself. "But in order that your ladyship may not interpret my inconsiderate words to the prejudice of the domestics of this establishment, permit me to assure you that I have received every possible attention at their hands. The circumstances to which I alluded——"

"Are perhaps connected with your position in this country?" said Eleanor. "I am acquainted with your history—the Earl has made it known to me in all its details—and I can understand, Mr. Wakefield, how painful it must be for one nurtured in ease and comfort, and looking upon himself as the heir to a large fortune, to awake from that dream and find adversity instead of prosperity staring him in the face. Such has indeed been your lot: but you must not look upon the future with apprehension and distrust. The Earl of Desborough has proffered you his friendship; and he is a man of warm heart and generous feelings. But not until you are completely restored to health, will he begin to talk to you seriously upon the course of life which may best suit your inclinations, and on which he will assist you to enter. In the interval it is his desire that you should make this house your home; and it would grieve him were he to hear you speak of any circumstances prompting you to depart abruptly."

"Again do I assure your ladyship," said Ramsey, in a soft and low voice, "that if I consulted my own inclinations only, I should not dream of quitting this hospitable mansion. But—pardon me—forgive me," he exclaimed, his tone suddenly becoming impassioned and his manner excited,—"my happiness is compromised—even if it be not already wrecked beyond redemption——Oh! would to God that I had never set foot in this metropolis—that I had never left my native Jamaica to seek my fortune on the British soil!"

And, averting his head, he appeared to be profoundly affected.

"Mr. Wakefield, I am grieved to observe that you are unhappy," said Eleanor, her heart palpitating more rapidly than ever, and a singular sensation coming over her as if some mystic influence associated herself and her own feelings with the passionate emotions which Ramsey displayed. "I speak to you more frankly than I should to any other friend or acquaintance, because you are a guest in this house—because you are a stranger in this country—

and because your misfortunes have neither been few nor light. And therefore do I repeat that I am grieved to behold these proofs of unhappiness on your part—and I fear that some secret sorrow is oppressing you. If this conjecture be correct—and if it should lie in the Earl of Desborough's power to remove the cause——"

"Every word that your ladyship utters is aggravating my misery," exclaimed Ramsey, casting upon her a look full of tenderness: then, instantly withdrawing his eyes, he said, "I implore you to suffer me to leave this house before my feelings hurry me into expressions which you would receive with indignation, and which would leave me no alternative than suicide in the despair that I should experience for having given utterance to them."

And, as he thus spoke, he sprang from his seat and rushed towards the door.

"Mr. Wakefield — stop — I conjure you!" cried Eleanor, also starting from her chair. "This conduct on your part will appear so strange—so unaccountable ——Besides," she added hastily, "it is scarcely kind of you to fly from us as if we were your enemies instead of your friends."

"You command me to remain—and I obey you, beauteous lady!" said Ramsey, turning back and advancing slowly towards the spot where the Countess, trembling all over with indescribable emotions, was supporting herself by holding to the mantelpiece. "Yes—I obey you in this, as I am ready to obey you in all things—even with the sacrifice of my life! But, remember," he added, suddenly sinking his voice to a low whisper,—"remember that, when in your presence, I am not master of myself."

"What do you mean?—I am bewildered—confused," murmured Eleanor, sinking back into her chair—while her glowing cheeks, her heaving bosom, and her melting eyes bore evidence to the soft and voluptuous feelings which filled her heart.

"You ask me what I mean," said Ramsey, placing himself near her, and fixing upon her a burning, impassioned look which she returned for a moment—a single moment; and then her eyes were cast downward, while deeper grew the blush upon her splendid countenance, and more agitated were the heavings of her breast:—"you ask me what I mean," he repeated, after an instant's pause: "I will tell you! A strange series of adventures rendered me an inmate of your mansion. The generous hospitality which I have received beneath this roof has naturally led me to regard your noble husband as the best of men — yourself as the most estimable of women. Thus far, then, am I devoted to you: I could fall down and worship you both as the kindest friends that God ever gave to man. But, alas! towards yourself, beauteous lady, this sentiment of profound gratitude has deepened into a feeling which I never knew before—a feeling which strangely combines the most exquisite bliss with the acutest anguish—the dreams of heaven with the pains of hell! For I behold you beautiful—Oh! so beautiful that you appear to me a vision of the fancy's creation, and not a being of earth: and I listen to your voice, which flows like delicious music upon my ears—and I gaze on your countenance, when you observe me not, until I feel as if I could throw myself on my knees before you and entreat that I may become your slave —your humblest menial, in order that I may demonstrate my devotion. Yes—dear lady, all this I experience towards you;—and yet I know that it is a crime to harbour such sentiments. But, my God! as well might a man endeavour to roll back the torrents of Niagara or breast the rapids of the Canadian rivers, as to hope to stem the tide of such feelings as these which agitate my heart. Therefore, again do I beseech you to suffer me to depart at once—to fly from this mansion whose hospitality I have outraged with my unhappy passion—to leave a city where so bright a vision has burst upon my view to dazzle me for a moment with its supernal lustre and then leave me wretched! Yes—I will depart—O God! I will fly——"

And again he rushed towards the door.

"Gustavus—Mr. Wakefield—this must not be!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Stay — remain — I conjure you!"

And, sinking back into the chair whence she had started for a moment, the Countess covered her face with her hands, as if to close her eyes upon everything around her and look only into the depths of her own soul.

"Is it possible that you have commanded me to remain, after hearing this confession which I have dared to make?" said Ramsey, throwing as much tenderness as possible into his voice, as he once more placed himself near the Countess. "You are not angry with me, then?—Oh! you are not angry with me—you will pardon my presumption—you will forgive my boldness—and perhaps you will pity me, dear lady?" he added, bending his head down close to her own.

"Oh! I am at a loss how to answer you," murmured Eleanor, withdrawing her hands from her countenance and slowly raising her eyes until they met his own—when glowing, ardent, and impassioned were the looks thus exchanged. "You have surprised me—filled me with confusion," she added, in a melting tone: "but you must not think of leaving me—you must not quit the house. Friendless as you are—inexperienced in the ways of this great metropolis——"

"But it is for *your* sake, my benefactress, that I am anxious to depart hence," interrupted Ramsey, in an impassioned tone. "I cannot endure the idea of insulting you by the spectacle of that misery into which my hopeless passion will plunge me. In six days—six short days—I have learnt to love you with an enthusiasm—an adoration—a worship amounting almost to a delirium of the feelings;—and it were madness on my part to remain within the sphere of this influence which maddens while it delights me—which bathes me in ecstatic bliss, and at the same time rends my soul with the crucifixion of ineffable tortures. Wherefore, then, should I remain——"

"Because I ask you to stay—because I implore you not to leave me thus," interrupted the Countess, now so completely borne away by the torrent of her own devouring passions, that she was ready to plunge headlong into the abyss of guilty pleasure and consummate any sacrifice for the sake of that handsome young man who appeared a perfect Adonis in her eyes as he avowed the ardour of his love with so much apparent ingenuousness. "No—you must remain, Gustavus — dear Gustavus," she added, raising her eyes towards him with a look in which all the voluptuousness of her nature and all the sensuality of her temperament spoke with an unmistakable eloquence: "you must remain, I say—to love me—and to be loved in return."

Her head drooped as her sinking voice murmured

these last words: but in another moment she was caught in Ramsey's arms—she was strained to his breast—their cheeks met in burning contact—and the yielding lady gave back the warm and luscious kisses which her lips received from his own.

"Then you love me, Eleanor—you love me?" whispered Ramsey, after a long pause.

"From the first moment that I saw you, I experienced a profound interest in you," was the soft response; "and that feeling has rapidly gained upon me, acquiring strength the more I saw of you—the oftener I found myself in your society."

"Oh! ten thousand thanks for this assurance, my adored Eleanor!" exclaimed Ramsey, smoothing her hair of velvet blackness and softness above her high and noble forehead. "It is sweet to be beloved by you; and if any one had whispered to me an hour ago that I was so soon to enjoy this elysian happiness, I should have fancied that none but an angel from heaven could have conferred it on me. Dearest, dearest Eleanor—for the first time in my life do I experience the ineffable bliss of love—its mysterious depth — its unfathomable influence — its ecstatic sway—its voluptuous refinement;—and I thank thee—from the profundities of my soul do I thank thee, for initiating me in this empyrean felicity. My existence has kindled into a new life: I feel the consummation of all the golden dreams and brilliant hopes which my fancy has ever formed when wondering what love could be."

"And I also love for the first time," whispered Eleanor, her bosom throbbing against the adventurous hand which now pressed it.

"For the first time!" exclaimed Ramsey. "Is it possible that you have never loved till now?"

"Never with the ardour—the devotion—the enthusiasm that I feel for you," she replied, her clear soft voice harmonising with that enchanting loveliness which invested her as with a halo.

"Then you love not your husband, sweet Eleanor?" said Ramsey, straining her to his breast as she lay half-reclining in his arms—her cheek resting against his own, and their hair mingling.

"No—I never loved him," she answered emphatically: "and I may perhaps some day tell you why all his attention, devotion, and generosity could never succeed in gaining my affections. Yes—that secret may I perhaps reveal to you, Gustavus," she added, a burning blush suffusing itself over her countenance, her neck, and her bosom—that firm and glowing bust with which her companion's hand was now toying in such delicious impunity. "But there was a moment—not very long ago—when I fancied that I loved *another;* and for a few days I mistook that transitory feeling for the real, pure, and true passion. Such however it was not: for the instant that this *other's* conduct manifested itself to me in its intense selfishness and utter profligacy, I was enabled to discard him from my heart with an ease that astonished even myself. But towards *you*, Gustavus, I experience a far different sentiment; and I know that this sentiment is love—the sincerest, tenderest love! For were you to appear before my eyes as a character less amiable and worthy than now I believe you to be, I should still love—still cling to you—still be ready and willing to follow you over the face of the earth. This, then, my Gustavus, is love—and it is a love which I have never known before and shall never know again!"

"Oh! welcome, dearest Eleanor—welcome indeed to my soul is this love of thine," said Ramsey, imprinting a thousand kisses upon her lips. "Yes—welcome this virgin love as if it were also your maiden charms which you surrendered up to me——"

"Gustavus—dear Gustavus," whispered Eleanor, throwing her arms about his neck and embracing him with the most impassioned ardour: "the words which you have just uttered——But, no matter——I dare not tell you my secret now——"

And her lovely head rested upon his shoulder, her bosom palpitating against his breast.

"To-night, my angel," murmured Ramsey, in a low and melting tone—for his voice was full of a rich masculine melody,—"to-night you will render me completely happy—you will grant me the privileges of love,—you will receive me in your chamber—not with the coyness of the timid girl, but with all the impassioned ardour which has already made your caresses so ineffably sweet."

The Countess whispered a reply; and Ramsey's features became radiant with joy, and triumph, and sensual passion.

"Oh! what happiness awaits me," he continued, in that same soft murmuring tone: "and how tediously will pass the hours until that blissful moment when I shall clasp thee in my arms, confident of already standing on the threshold of paradise! No—not tediously will pass those hours—because we shall be together during the interval; and, though in the presence of your husband, we must control our feelings—restrain the ardour of our looks—and speak only in the usual terms of a cold courtesy,—nevertheless we shall enjoy each other's society, and in the secret depths of our hearts will exist the knowledge that we love and that we shall soon be happy! And when the witching hour arrives at last, my Eleanor—then in the retirement of your own chamber, and when clasped in each other's arms, you can breathe in my ear that secret to which you alluded ere now."

"Yes—for henceforth we will have no secrets with each other," replied the fond, impassioned woman in whose veins the hot blood circulated like lightning.

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'Twas midnight—and Eleanor was now alone in her chamber.

The lady's-maids had just withdrawn, having assisted their mistress to lay aside her garments and arrange her luxuriant hair for the night.

A loose wrapper enveloped her form—her naked feet were thrust into slippers;—and, half-reclining upon a sofa drawn near the fire, the Countess awaited with indescribable feelings the coming of her lover.

The wax-candles upon the mantel had been extinguished; and a small night-lamp, placed on the toilette-table, joined its rays with the light of the fire to shed a soft and subdued lustre through the room. Delicious perfumes exhaled from porcelain vases standing in the window-recesses;—and the warm and fragrant atmosphere seemed to be the voluptuous breath of love itself.

How rapidly beat Eleanor's heart as she lay half-reclined upon the sofa!

A species of timidity—like that which the virgin-bride feels when entering the nuptial couch—was upon her. Her colour changed fifty times in a minute,—now glowing with the richest crimson upon her cheeks—now sinking into a strange paleness;

and in her eyes there was an expression of intense anxiety mingling with the fires of burning—scorching—devouring passion.

Was it that she knew she was doing wrong, but that she could not wrestle against the fury of her desires?—did she experience, at the bottom of her soul, a regret that she had gone thus far?—would she have retreated and repented even yet, if it were possible to overcome these sensual longings which consumed and devoured her?

We know not—and we have not leisure now to analyse the feelings of the Countess of Desborough: for, hark—a footstep in the passage reaches her ear——Oh! how audibly her heart beats—how tumultuously her bosom heaves!—the door opens—and Ramsey appears!

Scarcely can he restrain his impatience sufficiently to spare a moment to lock the door: another instant—and he is clasped in the arms of the Countess.

"Dearest, dearest Eleanor!" he exclaims, as he enfolds that warm, yielding, and lovely form in an embrace rendered almost frantic by the maddening influence of desire.

"Dearest, dearest Gustavus!" she murmurs, straining him to her heaving bosom.

And if hell's flames were immediately to follow the consummation of her frailty, she would not resign these few moments of elysium to save herself from that eternity of pain.

Forgotten is her husband — forgotten is every sense of duty—forgotten is all the world beyond the four walls of this chamber of love and voluptuousness: she abandons herself to that delirium of bliss in which her enraptured soul now floats—she flings herself headlong into the whirlpool of passion—she yields herself up to the intoxication of a full and overflowing sensuality.

It seemed as if the gates of paradise were opening to her comprehension for the first time; and Ramsey understood, without being told in words, the nature of that secret which Eleanor had promised to reveal to him, and the knowledge of which instantly accounted for all that had hitherto appeared so extraordinary and mysterious between herself and her husband.

CHAPTER LXXII.

FRESH SCHEMES AND PLOTS.

Leaving the Countess of Desborough and the resuscitated to enjoy the delights of love in each other's arms, we must go back three or four hours and request our readers to accompany us, at about half-past eight o'clock on that Sunday evening, to the dwelling of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall.

It will be remembered that this delectable lady had invited Lord Florimel to sup with her on the Sabbath now so particularly referred to—and she had promised that Camilla Morton should be present. Since the previous Monday evening, when the invitation was given, Mrs. Brace had not heard from the young nobleman; and she therefore concluded that he meant to honour her with his company. Due arrangements were accordingly made for the select banquet;—and Camilla, experiencing not the remotest suspicion of Mrs. Brace's treacherous intentions, had suffered herself to be persuaded to keep her mistress company in entertaining the noble guest. It is true that the young girl would in reality have preferred the privacy of her own chamber: but this feeling on her part was solely on account of the recent loss of her parents, and not through any misgiving with respect to the integrity of the milliner: on the contrary, in the artlessness and innocence of her soul, she had fancied that it was from motives of delicacy that Mrs. Brace had invited her, as she might have chosen any other of her young ladies, to be present on an occasion when she was to receive a male guest.

The preparations for the little banquet, then, were in progress: the cook was busy in the kitchen—Mrs. Brace, elegantly dressed, was already seated in her parlour—and Camilla was arranging her toilette in her own chamber,—when, at half-past eight, a letter was delivered at the house by one of Lord Florimel's footmen.

Mrs. Brace opened it hurriedly, and read the following words:—

"I regret, my dear friend, to occasion you any disappointment: but it is totally impossible for me to partake of your hospitality this evening. Nor do I think it likely that I shall ever be enabled to visit you again. For I have this day succeeded in making my peace with the charming and well-beloved Pauline: nay, more—I have demanded her in marriage of her father, who at once accepted my proposal.

"Now, look you, my dear friend—understand—and be reasonable. It suits me to throw off my bad habits and to enter on a more steady career. This I am resolved to do—and nothing shall deter me from my purpose. Be so kind, then, as to throw no more temptations in my way—to send no more young ladies to my house with letters—indeed, to forget that I was ever a patron or client of yours. Your friend I will with pleasure remain—that is, to render you a service whenever I may do so with honour to myself; but in any case, our future correspondence must be through the post. Now, do not think that I am angry with you: it is no such thing. I have not turned saint—but am merely reformed in that point of conduct which did indeed most deplorably lack amendment. I do not intend to cut you—nor yet to act ungratefully towards you; because I have received many kindnesses at your hands. But I am going to be steady—and that declaration explains everything.

"Rest assured, my dear friend, that you have no well-wisher more sincere than myself. As a proof of my good feeling I will give you a hint which may not be unserviceable: but I rely on your honour to keep the matter entirely to yourself. It is this:—*The plot in which poor Octavia Clarendon is the heroine, thickens rapidly. My beloved Pauline is not idle on behalf of her sister; and of course I cannot stay her proceedings, even if I felt inclined. In less than forty-eight hours she will have cleared up all doubt respecting the identity of Octavia's lover!*

"Again I implore you to retain these hints a profound secret, at least so far as my name is concerned. But be assured that there is a storm brewing—and you will do well to adopt some measure to screen yourself.

"FLORIMEL."

The letter fell from Mrs. Brace's hand—and at the same instant the Prince of Wales was ushered into the room by Harriet.

The lady's-maid retired immediately, closing the door behind her; and his Royal Highness advanced towards Mrs. Brace, who had risen from her seat on his entrance. But the moment he obtained a nearer view of her countenance, he was struck by the expression of trouble and annoyance which it wore; and, seizing both her hands, he exclaimed,

"My dear Fanny, what, in heaven's name! is the matter?"

"Nothing — nothing — a little temporary vexation," she said, endeavouring to smile: but the attempt was very ineffectual.

"It is something more serious than you choose to admit," observed the Prince: then, his eye catching the letter which lay upon the rug, he stooped down and picked it up.

"You must not read it!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, extending her hand to receive the note.

"This is silly of you, Fanny," said the Prince, neither giving her the document nor yet reading it. "I hold in my hand the undoubted cause of your annoyance and vexation—and you are well aware that I should not wish to become acquainted with its contents through any motive of jealousy. Such nonsense has long ceased to exist between you and me. Therefore, when I express an anxiety to read this letter, it is through pure solicitude on your behalf——"

"And an apprehension that it *may* probably refer to yourself," added the milliner, with a tartness which she very rarely exhibited to any one—much less to the Prince of Wales. "Well—I do not know but that you had better peruse the document," she observed immediately afterwards, in a milder tone.

His Royal Highness accordingly cast his eyes over the letter;—and his countenance fell.

"By heaven! this is serious," he ejaculated, flinging himself upon a seat, while Mrs. Brace resumed her chair opposite to him. "'*The plot thickens rapidly*,'" he said in a musing tone, as he referred to Florimel's communication: "by God! it must thicken as much as it likes," he exclaimed abruptly, "for anything that I can do to prevent it. '*Pauline is not idle on behalf of her sister.*' This is just what I foresaw—just what I expected all along. Pauline and Florimel are two maudlin sentimentalists together; and they will work a deal of mischief. How the deuce is it, Fanny, that you did not contrive to have Pauline debauched by some gay fellow, or else to produce a separation between her and Florimel? The thing is serious: but may I be particularly damned if I know how to remedy it. '*In less than forty-eight hours she*'—that's Pauline—'*will have cleared up all doubt respecting the identity of Octavia's lover.*' Forty-eight hours! When was this note written?"

"It reached me a few instants before you entered the room," answered Mrs. Brace.

"To be sure! I ought to have recollected the confusion and trouble in which you were plunged at the moment," said the Prince. "Well — forty-eight hours——that's plenty of time to adopt some decisive measure in."

"Oh! you must not take the phrase in its literal sense," exclaimed the milliner. "It may mean a longer, or it may mean a shorter period: but it is used emphatically to show that the interval will be brief ere your rank is discovered. So far, therefore, from postponing a due and serious consideration of the proper measures to be adopted, we must deliberate at once."

"If there be one thing more than another that I hate," said the Prince, speaking as if he had a nausea in his mouth, "it is the trouble of thinking on disagreeable matters."

"Possibly!" observed Mrs. Brace, with petulant dryness. "But your Royal Highness will be pleased to reflect that an exposure in this instance may compromise the very crown which you have in the perspective. A young lady of good family, seduced by the Prince of Wales under a feigned name—led to believe that his intentions were honourable and that he would espouse her,—my God! such a history would create a feeling of indignation from one end of the kingdom to the other; and the people would pull down my house about my ears."

"No, my dear Fanny—we'd have a regiment of Guards stationed along Pall Mall to protect you," responded the Prince, in a jocular manner. "Thank God, we always have plenty of General-officers who like nothing better than having to open a murderous cannonade upon the people."

"This is not a time nor a subject for jesting," said Mrs. Brace. "I beseech you to look seriously at the matter — for it troubles me profoundly. You perceive that even if you were enabled to silence Octavia by means of the influence you exercise over her, her sister Pauline would still proceed——"

"And this Florimel would no doubt help her," added the Prince. "By the bye, he is coming to Carlton House to-morrow night. He voted with the small Whig section in the House of Lords the other evening—and I was therefore compelled to place his name on my reception-list. I shall be very civil to him to-morrow, and thus disarm him of any rancour with which Pauline may have inspired him: for it is perfectly clear that the identity of Mr. Harley with the Prince of Wales is even more than suspected by that young lady—whereas Octavia is perhaps still full of uncertainty."

"You may conciliate Florimel, perhaps," said Mrs. Brace: "besides, you perceive by his note that he would rather hush the matter up if he could. But depend upon it, from all I have heard, Pauline Clarendon is a girl of spirit and will leave you no peace when once she shall have established the fact of your identity. There is only one plan that I can think of——"

"Name it—name it, my dear Fanny," cried the Prince. "I knew you would end by suggesting something: you are so fertile in expedients. Besides, women always like to make matters out as bad as they can, when they mean to wind up by proposing a remedy. Now then, my dear, what is your plan?"

"Listen patiently for a few minutes," said the milliner, smiling at the compliments which the Prince paid her. "You are well acquainted with Mr. Clarendon's position. A few weeks ago he believed himself certain of succeeding to the Marchmont peerage, the Hon. Arthur Eaton being then at death's door. But this young gentleman has recovered in a most miraculous manner; and there is not the slightest chance that Mr. Clarendon will ever be Lord Marchmont. To make things still more unpleasant for Mr. Clarendon, he accepted a large income from the present Lord Marchmont, and went and took a fine house, at the time when Arthur Eaton was supposed to be dying. He is therefore totally dependant on Lord Marchmont's bounty; and at the old peer's death, he will be dependant on Arthur. Such a position is doubtless intolerable for Mr. Clarendon; and yet it is quite clear that he cannot well retreat, and go back to his cottage in the Edgeware Road and his hundred or two hundred a year."

"What on earth is all this to come to?" demanded the Prince of Wales.

"Why—that you must obtain a peerage and a pension for Mr. Clarendon, as the price of having the intrigue with his elder daughter completely hushed up," returned Mrs. Brace.

"And Pauline?" said his Royal Highness.

"Must submit to any arrangement her father chooses to make," answered the astute milliner.

"By heavens! you are the shrewdest woman I ever met in all my life," exclaimed the Prince. "But you forget that I have not the slightest influence with the Ministry to obtain a peerage and a pension for any one who is even well known—much less for a comparatively obscure individual——"

"No influence with the ministry perhaps," interrupted Mrs. Brace: "but have you not the power of *extorting by menaces* from your royal father——"

And she fixed her fine eyes significantly upon him.

"To be sure! Hannah Lightfoot's paper—or rather the half of it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Your advice is admirable. I'll send my friend Tim Meagles to my father to negociate the business. On Tuesday morning the matter shall be entered upon. Thanks to your counsel, Fanny, I now see my way pretty clearly out of this thicket of difficulties. And now you will permit me to inform you what it is that brought me hither this evening."

"I am all attention," said Mrs. Brace. "But will you stay and sup with me? You perceive by Florimel's note——"

"That he has disappointed you," added the Prince, with a smile. "Well—I will take his place at your table this evening. Shall we be alone?"

"If you like. But there was to have been another——"

"A young lady, I'll be bound!" ejaculated his Royal Highness.

"Precisely. She is a sweet creature—and I intended to tempt Florimel with her," said Mrs. Brace. "Her name is Camilla Morton—and as a camilla is she pure and chaste."

"By all means let her sup with us," cried the Prince. "In the meantime I will hurriedly inform you what brought me hither this evening. You are aware that to-morrow night there are grand doings at Carlton House. Invitations were of course sent, amongst others, to the Earl and Countess of Desborough; and I heard just now—about an hour before I came hither—that the Countess will accept the invitation."

"I should scarcely believe it," observed Mrs. Brace.

"But I know that she *will* be present to-morrow evening," returned the Prince, emphatically. "My sister the Princess Sophia and the Duchess of Devonshire both told me so just now, in the course of conversation."

"And what do you propose to do?" inquired the milliner: "for, fertile as I may be in expedients, I have not as yet thought of any scheme to forward your views with respect to Lady Desborough."

"I believe that Mrs. Fitzherbert has sent to request your attendance upon her to-morrow evening to superintend her toilette—has she not?" asked the Prince: and, on receiving an affirmative reply, he continued to observe, "Well—that is for the grand dinner-party at seven o'clock; and you will have to remain at Carlton House until nine or half-past in order to see that Mrs. Fitzherbert's toilette is in perfection for the ball. Is it not just as I am describing?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," responded Mrs. Brace, smiling at the minuteness of detail into which his Royal Highness was entering, and the ultimate object of which she could not by any means conjecture.

"So far, so good," resumed the Prince. "Now, you are aware that when the company arrive, they ascend the grand staircase, and the ladies pass into a toilette-chamber to lay aside their scarfs or cloaks, before they proceed to the ball-room."

"I cannot be ignorant of this fact," observed Mrs. Brace, "since I have more than once assisted Mrs. Fitzherbert's gentlewomen in that very chamber to receive the ladies' cloaks. This was, however, several years ago, when curiosity prompted me to take that post in order to obtain a good view of your lady-guests and observe the fashions which chiefly prevailed in their toilette."

"Ah! I had forgotten that you had done this," said the Prince. "Well—it is precisely the same thing that I require you to do again to-morrow evening. You will then watch for the Countess of Desborough—and the moment she makes her appearance, you will hasten forward to attend upon her."

"But her ladyship will refuse my services with indignation," cried Mrs. Brace.

"Her ladyship, on the contrary, will affect not to recognise you," returned the Prince. "Do you think that she would draw all eyes upon herself, by any display of feeling on such an occasion? Besides, if questioned by her friends and acquaintances relative to the cause of her anger against you, what reply could she make? Only reflect for a moment upon her position. She has accepted the invitation, partly, no doubt, for fear her husband should imagine that she had any cause of complaint against me—and partly in compliance with the wishes of the Princess Sophia, who is her very dear friend. Her behaviour will therefore be of a character to defy the least suspicion that anything, agreeable or disagreeable, has ever taken place between herself and me."

"I comprehend the force of your reasoning," said Mrs. Brace. "I shall therefore hasten to volunteer my assistance to her ladyship the moment she enters the toilette-room——"

"And, while thus aiding her," interrupted the Prince, "you will whisper in her ear these words:—'*It is of the utmost importance that I should speak to your ladyship alone, for a few minutes, presently. Your honour is threatened — your reputation is at stake. I both can and will show your ladyship how to defeat your enemies.*'—These ominous words will terrify her, and make her anxious to know more. Her curiosity will be painfully excited, especially as *you* are the person to utter so singular and mysterious a warning. Taking advantage of this impression which you are certain to create, you must add these words: '*At midnight precisely I shall be at the end of the passage leading from the left of the great landing which your ladyship will cross to enter the ball-rooms. If your ladyship wishes to know more, you can meet me then and there. But come alone—or I shall hurry away if I see you accompanied by any one.*'"

"And if her ladyship should keep the appointment?" said Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"Then you will throw open the door of the room

at the end of the passage where she is to meet you —and the Countess will pass on into that apartment, thinking that you are showing her into some retired place where you may converse together without fear of interruption or observation."

"And what next?" asked the milliner.

"Why—the instant the Countess has crossed that threshold," returned the Prince,—"instead of following her, you will shut the door hastily—lock it on the outside—and take your departure. Leave all the rest to me."

"The scheme appears as clumsy in its conception as it will prove awkward in the carrying out," said Mrs. Brace.

"It may seem wild, far-fetched, and even preposterous to describe," observed his Royal Highness: "but, when managed with your tact and ingenuity, it will pass off just as I anticipate. At all events, you will do your best, Fanny?"

"Most decidedly," answered the milliner.

The footman now entered the room to lay the table for supper; and in a few minutes Camilla Morton made her appearance. The Prince of Wales was introduced to her as Mr. Harley; and he was instantaneously struck by her sweet, pensive, and touching style of beauty. The lily whiteness and rose-leaf hue which were so delicately mingled in her complexion, were set off to the greatest advantage by her mourning garb; and the dark vesture likewise enhanced the elegance and grace of that figure which, though slight, was rounded in accordance with the most perfect specimens of Grecian art.

She was somewhat surprised when, instead of meeting Lord Florimel, she was thus introduced to *a Mr. Harley:* but the milliner hastened to inform her that his lordship had been seized with a sudden indisposition, and that Mr. Harley, who was "a very old friend indeed," had dropped in by accident;—and as Camilla cared nothing for either the one or the other, it was perfectly indifferent to her whether she sate down to supper with Lord Florimel or Mr. Harley.

The evening passed away; and, although Camilla fancied that Mr. Harley fixed his eyes upon her somewhat intently more than once, she was nevertheless compelled to admit to herself that he was a polished gentleman, very agreeable, and endowed with great conversational powers. When she rose at eleven o'clock to retire to her own chamber, the Prince proffered his hand and endeavoured to convey her's to his lips, while Mrs. Brace was conveniently stooping to pick up her handkerchief: but Camilla instantly snatched back her hand, while her cheeks suddenly became crimson;—and, darting on his Royal Highness a look which convinced him that he had made no impression upon *her* heart, however agreeable she might have thought him as a companion, the young maiden hurried from the room.

And when she had gained the solitude of her own chamber, Camilla burst into tears: for a suspicion, faint as the murmuring of far-off waters in the ears, had now for the first time sprung up in the secret depths of her soul,—a suspicion with regard to the virtue of Mrs. Brace and the respectability of her establishment.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE GRAND ENTERTAINMENT AT CARLTON HOUSE

It was half-past nine o'clock on the memorable Monday evening so anxiously anticipated by many hearts; and the state saloons of the princely dwelling were bathed as it were in a flood of roseate luxury.

Nothing could transcend—scarcely equal—the brilliancy of the scene.

The lustre of crystal chandeliers and innumerable wax-candles — the gorgeous draperies—the magnificent pictures and mirrors — the splendid furniture, rich in crimson velvet, and glittering with inlaid gold—the costly vases of porcelain and alabaster, filled with hot-house flowers—the immense China jars whence perfumes exhaled—the warm and fragrant atmosphere—and the strains of delicious music which began to pour through the spacious apartment,—all these produced a magical effect, to ravish and enchant the senses.

The guests invited to the ball were now beginning to arrive; and the Prince of Wales, having already left the dinner-table, was conversing with those ladies who had been present at the select banquet.

There was Mrs. Fitzherbert, in all the grandeur of those charms which were now embellished by the richest and most tasteful toilette. Her hair, so pale in hue but so glossy and shining, appeared to have caught the golden rays of a brilliant noonday sun and to have imprisoned them in those luxuriant tresses, which showered over a back and shoulders of pearly whiteness, and even caressed the full and finely rounded bosoms which the low dress left more than half-exposed to the ravished eyes of the beholder.

Next to Mrs. Fitzherbert sate the Duchess of Devonshire, radiant in loveliness, and with glowing smiles upon her coral lips. Nature's own roses, which art cannot equal, blushed softly upon her cheeks; and her silky auburn hair was brilliant with all the richest metallic hues. Love, pleasure, and light were in her large deep hazel eyes: she was a glorious being—a splendid specimen of that finely developed, superb, and Juno-like beauty which in a moment can melt into the tender and yielding sensuousness of wanton Venus.

And in that same saloon where the Prince of Wales was now conversing with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, there were other heavenly faces and lovely forms: and the lustre of the chandeliers was reflected in eyes bright as the diamonds that surmounted polished foreheads or glistened amidst shining hair. Gracefully, too, waved ostrich-plumes over charming heads; and fair hands agitated the rich fans which raised a gentle zephyr in the midst of the warm, languid, and perfumed atmosphere; — and the rustling satin or the richly flowing velvet swept over the thick carpet, as light footsteps moved across that scene of pleasure.

The company invited to the ball had begun to arrive; and every minute some scion of the aristocracy—some noble, with a star upon his breast, or some lady bearing a proud name — made obeisance to the heir-apparent to the British throne.

Oh! who would have thought that two thirds of the great nobles now assembled, were, if stripped of all the *prestige* of their rank and honours, nothing more nor less than the most infernal robbers, usurpers, and oppressors that ever preyed upon the vitals of the industrious millions?—or who would have fancied that more than half of those beauteous creatures gathered there, and who boasted an alliance with the first families in Britain, were the veriest demireps that ever reflected in the aristocratic sphere the profligacy and demoralization which parade the pavement of the metropolis?

But so it was *then*—so it is *at the present day*——and so it will *ever* be with the British Aristocracy until the knell of its corrupt, iniquitous, and accursed existence be rung by the mighty voice of the popular will.

To return, however, to the thread of our narrative.

We have already stated that the Prince of Wales was conversing with his special favourites in one of the magnificent saloons thrown open at Carlton House upon the occasion of which we are writing: we should now add that in another apartment of the splendid suite, the Princess Sophia was seated upon a sofa, surrounded by several ladies and nobles of the highest rank, and with whom she discoursed in a manner which they subsequently pronounced, in the usual nauseating phraseology of the Court, to be most "gracious" and "condescending."

The Princess was in reality a very handsome woman. Her figure was modelled to the most voluptuous proportions: the plump, sloping shoulders—the long arching neck—and the exuberant bust were of the most dazzling whiteness;—and upon her cheeks the hues of the blushing rose and the stainless lily were delicately blended. Her large blue eyes languished with a wanton look—and her

mouth had that unmistakable expression of sensuality which invariably marked and still marks every scion of the family of Brunswick. Her luxuriant light brown hair flowed in a thousand shining ringlets over her shoulders; and she had a habit of every now and then slightly shaking her head as if it were a pleasure to hear the rustling of those glossy curls or to feel them moving upon her warm and polished flesh. In fine, her whole appearance conveyed the impression of an amorous young creature in whose imagination soft, tender, and wanton thoughts habitually floated, but whose passions were at times susceptible of being excited to a devouring heat and a furious intensity.

Such indeed was the Princess Sophia—one of the frail and licentious daughters of George the Third.

But we must leave her Royal Highness for a brief space, while we hasten to inform our readers that at about a quarter to ten o'clock the Earl of Desborough descended from his carriage at the principal entrance to Carlton House, and assisted his beautiful Countess and the lovely Pauline Clarendon to alight. Then, giving an arm to each lady, he escorted them up the grand staircase.

Oh! how Pauline's heart beat as each step brought her nearer to that circle of light in which she knew that the master of that gorgeous scene was as it were embowered in luxury and enthroned in splendour. That she was about to behold Mr. Harley in the Prince of Wales, she had no longer any doubt: the scene at the Duchess of Devonshire's on the preceding day had removed all previously existing uncertainty upon that point. For Mrs. Mordaunt was the Princess Sophia—and this fact accounted for the sudden disappearance of Mr. Harley when the carriage broke down opposite Paradise Villas, on the first night of his acquaintance with Octavia and Pauline.

When, therefore, the younger Miss Clarendon had reflected upon all the incidents of that night, and recalled to mind the ridiculous tale which Mr. Harley had related (on the occasion of his second visit to the villa) to account for his abrupt departure after gazing in at the window of the travelling-barouche,—when she pondered on all this, Pauline had naturally come to the conclusion that Mr. Harley *was* the Prince of Wales beyond all possibility of doubt.

With a beating heart, then, was it that the lovely creature now ascended the wide and brilliantly-lighted marble staircase; and the inward agitation which she experienced gave a rich crimson glow to her cheeks.

On her side, the Countess of Desborough was not altogether composed and tranquil. She abhorred the idea of meeting the Prince of Wales;—and—more than that—the night of love and pleasure which she had passed in the arms of Philip Ramsey, had rendered her as timid and bashful as a bride on the morning after her wedding. For conscience had its qualms—or rather its terrors with the really well-principled Eleanor, who was a mere novice in the art of duplicity, and who was very far from being an experienced profligate. Thus was it whenever she recalled to mind her frailty of the past night, she felt a burning blush mantling upon her cheeks and suffusing itself over her neck and bosom; while it seemed to her that every eye which glanced upon her countenance could read her secret in that tell-tale glow—and this thought, or rather sensation, made her blush all the more deeply and added to her confusion.

On reaching the summit of the grand staircase, the Earl of Desborough left his beauteous wife and the charming Pauline at the door of the ladies' toilette-chamber, while he remained in a waiting-room until they should rejoin him.

The Countess and Pauline accordingly entered that toilette-chamber; and the moment the door closed behind them, the former was accosted by Mrs Brace and the latter by one of the numerous females in attendance there.

The blood mantled on Eleanor's cheeks, suffusing even her lofty brow and descending to her very neck and bosom, when the milliner of Pall Mall, with affable though profoundly respectful mien, advanced to receive the velvet scarf which the patrician lady had thrown over her shoulders to defend herself against the chill night air when descending from the carriage.

The first impulse of the Countess was to pass the woman by in haughty indignation: but, sweeping her looks around, she beheld several ladies of her acquaintance—and, suddenly fearful of provoking a scene with Mrs. Brace, she paused and allowed the milliner to remove the scarf from her shoulders.

"One word, your ladyship—start not—but hear me!" whispered Mrs. Brace: "I declare most solemnly that I wish you well and seek to render you a service, in spite of the displeasure you have visited upon me."

Eleanor turned completely round—fixed her magnificent eyes keenly upon the milliner's countenance—and, perceiving a solemn earnestness in the woman's manner, said in a low voice, "Is it possible that you can have the power or the inclination to render me a service?"

"Yes—a most important service, lady," replied the milliner. "Draw near towards this mirror—there!—now permit me to arrange this straggling curl:" and, seizing the opportunity afforded by her having thus led the Countess aside, Mrs. Brace said in a deep and impressive, but only just audible voice, "The honour of your ladyship is at stake—you stand on the verge of ruin—and I alone can save you!"

Eleanor started—staggered—and supported herself by laying her hand on the shoulder of Mrs. Brace, who whispered, "Compose yourself—in the name of God! compose yourself! No harm is as yet done—the evil only menaces you *now*—it is not present."

"And that evil?" murmured Eleanor, her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom becoming again suffused with a crimson glow: for, in the bewilderment of the moment, and with the milliner's ominous words still ringing in her ears, she naturally associated the warning she had just received with the love, voluptuousness, and frailty of the preceding night—that night which she had passed in the arms of Philip Ramsey! Therefore was it that, with a thousand conflicting ideas springing up in her imagination, the Countess murmured inquiringly, "And that evil?"

"I cannot explain myself now, dear lady," responded Mrs. Brace, in the same rapid and low tone: "but believe me—oh! believe me—I wish you well."

"I shall endure the most torturing suspense until you have leisure to be more explicit," said the Countess, forgetting, in the agitation of her mind, that her words and manner were both calculated to make the milliner suspect that she had really done

something of a nature which she would fain conceal and which she trembled to have made known.

"Your ladyship sees that I cannot enter into particulars *here*, nor *at present*," returned Mrs. Brace: then, pausing as if to reflect upon what course it would be better to pursue, and in another moment seeming to be inspired with an idea, she said, "At midnight precisely you can steal from the ball-rooms—on any pretence—no one will perceive you: and if your ladyship will then repair to the extremity of the long passage leading from the great landing, I will be there. But come alone—for to your ear only must I breathe the communication which I have to make."

"I will be there—at midnight—punctually," murmured Eleanor, her voice sounding hoarse and thick. "Give me a glass of water."

The milliner hastened to comply with this demand; and the limpid element went hissing down the parched throat of the Countess of Desborough.

"Is your ladyship better?" inquired Mrs. Brace, as she received back the glass.

"Yes—I thank you," responded Eleanor: and, by a desperate effort, she overcame her emotions. "At all events you assure me," she whispered rapidly to the milliner, "that the evil—whatever it is—can be averted."

"Tranquillise yourself completely on that head, my lady," said Mrs. Brace.

"I will—I must," observed the Countess. "At midnight—punctually."

And having darted a significant look upon the milliner, whose sincerity she no longer thought of doubting, Eleanor turned to rejoin Pauline Clarendon. This young lady's hair had required some little adjustment, which had just engaged the three or four minutes occupied by the above rapidly whispered dialogue between the Countess and Mrs. Brace.

It was now for the first time that the milliner observed that Eleanor's companion was none other than Pauline Clarendon: for when the two ladies had entered the room, Mrs. Brace was so intent upon affording the Countess her officious aid that she had not even thought of darting a glance at the beauteous creature who was with her. But now Mrs. Brace recognised Pauline immediately—not only on account of her marvellous likeness to her sister Octavia, but also from the fact of having seen them together on that morning when Camilla Morton had delivered the note at the house of Lord Florimel.

On thus recognising the younger Miss Clarendon, a painful conviction instantly sprang up in the milliner's mind that something was wrong, and that the plot, as Florimel's letter had warned her, was indeed thickening. But what could she do? Nothing:—matters must take their chance;—and, however great her anxiety and suspense now were, there was no alternative but to await the gradual development of circumstances as they should occur.

In the meantime,—while the bewildered Mrs. Brace was thus giving way to her hurried and agitated reflections,—Eleanor and Pauline had issued from the toilette-chamber and rejoined the Earl: then, the former leaning on his right arm, and the latter on his left, they crossed the landing to the magnificent saloons from the open portals of which streamed the warm and perfumed atmosphere.

Gloriously handsome appeared the Countess of Desborough—bewitchingly beautiful was Pauline Clarendon. The agitation which each experienced—though from such widely different causes—tinged their cheeks with a roseate hue, which set off in more dazzling contrast the fairer and softer tints. But Eleanor's olive complexion looked rich and glowing, though of transparent purity, with her own heightened colour and in that blaze of golden lustre: while nothing could be whiter or more polished in the shape of living flesh than the forehead, neck, and bosom of Miss Clarendon.

How superb was Eleanor in her beauty—how fascinating was Pauline in her loveliness! The former seemed as if she were able to ravish a heart with one glance of her splendid black eyes—the other to steal it away with her soft and witching looks.

And now, as they entered those rooms where all was a blaze of attractions and an assemblage of charms,—yet were they not lost in the bright galaxy: but they stood out from the radiant sphere as stars of an equal glory with Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Duchess of Devonshire, or the Princess Sophia.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE BALL-ROOM.

It was to the Princess Sophia that the Earl of Desborough, the Countess, and Miss Pauline Clarendon, first paid their homage.

Her Royal Highness received Eleanor with a sisterly cordiality, and gave a most kind and flattering welcome to Pauline. Indeed, the ladies and nobles assembled in that apartment were astonished at the extreme air of friendliness and even familiarity with which the Princess proffered her hand to Miss Clarendon; and whisperingly they asked each other who she was.

This query was soon answered by some young nobleman who had seen and admired her at Lord Marchmont's ball; and a general anxiety prevailed to become acquainted with a young lady who appeared to enjoy the highest favour with her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia.

Lord Florimel, who had already arrived, was now speedily by the side of Pauline: but she was not as yet able to take his arm, inasmuch as it was necessary that she should remain with the Earl and Countess of Desborough until after the presentation to the Prince of Wales. Florimel saw that, beneath an exterior apparently calm, a considerable agitation and excitement prevailed in the bosom of the charming creature whom he loved so devotedly; and he seized an opportunity to whisper a few reassuring words in her ears.

"Be not uneasy on my account, dear Gabriel," she hastily but tenderly responded: "there will be no scene—no betrayal of anything extraordinary;—for I am already prepared to know *the worst* in respect to my unfortunate sister."

Florimel threw upon her a look full of affection; and Pauline rapidly returned it, as she again took the proffered arm of the Earl of Desborough, who was now about to conduct herself and the Countess into the presence of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

Amidst the brilliant assemblage they passed;—and in a few minutes they crossed the threshold of the unfolded portals leading into the room where the heir-apparent was conversing, as already described, with

Mrs. Fitzherbert and Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire.

And now Pauline Clarendon summoned all her courage to her aid—nerved herself with all the presence of mind she could possibly command—and exerted every energy to maintain her composure.

Another moment—and she came within view of the Prince of Wales!

From her cheeks fled, in an instant, the rich hues of the rose—a cold tremor struck her as if an ice-shaft had pierced her bosom—and the Earl of Desborough felt her hand sliding from his arm.

"Courage, Miss Clarendon!" he whispered hastily: for the nobleman imagined that she was overawed by the presence of the heir-apparent.

The words recalled Pauline to herself: the colour came back to her cheeks—and she threw another rapid look towards his Royal Highness.

Oh! there was not the faintest possibility of mistake: 'twas he—Mr. Harley—the seducer of her sister!

A dizziness again seized upon Pauline as this conviction burst upon her—or rather as the last glimmering of uncertainty was dissipated in a moment: but with an instinctive or mechanical motion she kept by the Earl's side—measuring her pace to his—leaning lightly upon his arm—and appearing to be embarrassed only by that species of timidity which young ladies are accustomed to feel when introduced into the presence of Royalty.

And now the Earl suddenly stopped short—and Pauline made a low obeisance because she supposed it to be the moment to do so, as indeed it was—and she heard her own name mentioned by the Countess of Desborough who was thus presenting her to his Royal Highness—and then, timidly raising her eyes, she saw in an instant that the Prince was exerting almost superhuman efforts to conceal the trouble which agitated his countenance.

Never, until Pauline's dying-day, did she forget the look which his Royal Highness wore at the moment when their glances thus met. Rage—terror—amazement—confusion—uncertainty how to act, were all depicted upon those lineaments: but quick as the eye could wink, they became composed and settled once more—so that none present save Pauline beheld that evanescent whirlwind of conflicting feelings which swept over his features.

Recovering all his presence of mind—or rather, suddenly arming himself with the courage of desperation—George Prince of Wales addressed a few affable observations to the Countess of Desborough—said something particularly friendly to the Earl—and then, darting upon Pauline a look of peculiar significance, half imploring and half commanding her to be silent with respect to her previous knowledge of him, he at once invited her to open the ball with him.

The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were amazed at this extraordinary and unprecedented proceeding on the part of his Royal Highness; and Mrs. Fitzherbert instantly became scarlet with anger.

For, according to the usual etiquette, the Prince should have opened the ball with some lady of the highest rank: whereas he was about to bestow this exclusive honour upon a plain *Miss*, who was comparatively unknown in the fashionable circles of the metropolis!

No wonder, then, that the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were amazed: but we must add that they were well pleased for Pauline's sake also. Indeed the young lady had become a special favourite with them both; and as the former was not jealous of her royal paramour's proceedings, and as the latter had nothing to be jealous of in that respect, they experienced a generous satisfaction at this brilliant triumph which Pauline was about to enjoy. For, in the courtly circles of those times, it was considered a grand thing for any young lady thus to attract the attention of Royalty: and doubtless the same sickening, nauseating, maudlin sentiment prevails at the present day.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert could scarcely restrain her rage. First she became scarlet—then pale as a sheet; and her superb bosom stood upheaved, with the suspended breath, for nearly a minute, when it began to throb and palpitate tumultuously. For, as ignorant as the others present concerning the motives which could possibly have induced the Prince to accord the honour of his hand to Miss Pauline Clarendon for the first quadrille, Mrs. Fitzherbert naturally supposed that he was smitten with her beauty; and although she knew that he was not a saint, yet this was the first time that he had ever appeared to treat herself with such marked insult and another with such conspicuous favour in her presence.

As for Pauline—overwhelmed with confusion at the unexpected invitation which she had received, she murmured a few scarcely intelligible words of thanks for the honour conferred upon her; and, ere she was half recovered from the bewilderment into which the entire proceeding had thrown her, she found the Prince proffering her his arm to lead her into the adjacent apartment, where the dancing was to take place.

The quadrille was soon formed; and many a titled lady cast envious eyes upon Pauline, as his Royal Highness conducted her amidst the glittering throng to the head of the room.

The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough gave their hands to partners in that first dance, which the Princess Sophia likewise graced with her presence.

But where was Mrs. Fitzherbert? Overcome with a rage to which she dared not however give vent, she had retreated precipitately from the suite of gilded saloons where this magnificent entertainment took place.

"Pauline, I thank you for the forbearance which you exercised towards me ere now," whispered the Prince of Wales, while the gentle symphonies were floating through the rooms. "You have not been attracted hither by the same motive which has brought the other moths to flit around the light of Royalty: you came to clear up a doubt—to confirm a suspicion!" added the heir-apparent, emphatically, although in a low voice: for he now comprehended the meaning of those portions of Lord Florimel's letter which are printed in italic.

"Your Royal Highness thanks me for my forbearance," said Pauline, looking down and speaking in a tremulous tone: "but I deserve no praise for having exercised a proper control over my feelings. Think you that I obtained an introduction hither for the sake of proclaiming my sister's wrongs aloud? No: I am not so insensate," she

added, raising her eyes and fixing them for a moment upon the countenance of the Prince.

"I read a stern decision in your looks, Pauline," he said, with a visible tremor: "what does it mean?"

"It means that justice must be done to my sister—or that her wrongs shall be bitterly avenged," answered Pauline, in reality speaking with a strong emphasis, but still without any excitement being apparent to the eyes of those who stood near.

"Vengeance?—do you talk of vengeance, Pauline?" said the Prince, unable to control an ironical modulation of his voice. "Remember that it is as foolish as it is rude to breathe such a word in the ears of one who can crush his private enemies, as if they were worms."

"Your Royal Highness's sister, the Princess Sophia, will protect and shield me—*for her own sake*," answered Pauline, in a cold, firm, and collected tone.

Fortunate was it for the Prince of Wales that the quadrille commenced at this moment, and that the start which he gave, as Miss Clarendon mentioned his royal sister's name, was thus absorbed as it were in the opening of the Terpsichorean evolutions. For like lightning searing his brain, did the remembrance flash to his imagination that the Princess's frailty was known to Pauline; and this circumstance had escaped his memory and been totally lost sight of during the brief and hurried dialogue which we have just described.

"Pauline," he said, when the arrangements of the dance again allowed them an opportunity of conversing, "it is impossible that we can talk at our ease upon a certain subject this evening. But—tell me—does your sister know that you were to be presented at Carlton House——"

"Octavia entertains not the remotest suspicion of my intention," interrupted Pauline. "She is unaware that I have undertaken the championship of her wrongs—the vindication of the black treachery which has been practised upon her."

"Your words are severe, young lady," said his Royal Highness, with flushing countenance.

"Not more severe than your conduct deserves," responded Pauline, mildly but firmly.

"Well—we will discuss all this on as early an occasion as you choose to appoint," observed the Prince. "But answer me one or two questions, Pauline—for you are not so ungenerous as to leave me in a state of suspense on points of no possible interest to yourself."

"Certainly not," said the young lady. "If your Royal Highness will put those questions——"

"You will answer them? Thanks for the assurance which your words imply. Tell me, then—are the Earl and Countess of Desborough aware of your object in coming hither this evening?"

"On my honour, they are *not*," replied Pauline, emphatically: "they believe that I am instigated by those mingled motives of curiosity and vanity which young ladies naturally entertain in this respect."

"And now tell me whether Lord Florimel——"

"Yes—he is acquainted with *all* my motives," interrupted Pauline. "I will not deceive your Royal Highness in a single point: but at the same time I will assure you that Lord Florimel is incapable of betraying this secret so long as it shall please *me* to keep it and have it kept."

"One word more, Pauline," said his Royal Highness: then, sinking his voice to a whisper which was barely audible, he asked, "Does Lord Florimel know of that adventure at the villa in the Edgeware Road—that adventure, I mean, in which my sister the Princess Sophia——"

"God forbid that I should have betrayed a secret which every sentiment of honour, propriety, and humanity has hitherto enjoined me to keep!" exclaimed Pauline, in a low but emphatic tone.

"You are really a noble-minded girl!" said the Prince, not making the remark in the hope of conciliating Pauline's favour in the affair of her sister, but speaking with a sincerity which he expressed as it were in spite of himself.

Again did the requisitions of the dance compel them to break off their discourse; and as soon as they were once more enabled to resume it, the Prince said, "When and where will you oblige me with an interview, Pauline?"

"I will write to your Royal Highness in the course of a few days," was the answer. "In the meantime, fear not that the breath of scandal shall be allowed to sport with the united names of yourself and Octavia."

"But you will tell Octavia that you have been here to-night?—you will reveal to her that the identity of her lover with the Prince of Wales is no longer subject to a doubt?" said the heir-apparent: "and then she will betray everything in the frantic wildness of her grief——"

"You know, then, that her anguish will be rending in the extreme," interrupted Pauline: "and yet you seem to be more solicitous for your own safety than for the peace of mind of that confiding and innocent girl whom you have ruined. Prince of Wales, I hate you for your inordinate selfishness," added Pauline, in a low but strangely emphatic tone: and for an instant her eyes, usually so melting and tender, shot forth the lightnings of an implacable feeling as she fixed her looks on the countenance of the heir-apparent.

"It is better that we should converse no longer on *this* subject, Miss Clarendon," he said, deeply humiliated, yet unable to resent what he conceived to be the insult conveyed in the spirited young lady's words. "You have promised to write to me—and in the interval," he observed, assuming a kinder tone, "I trust to your goodness to pacify Octavia. Any reparation which it lies within my power to make——"

"Your Royal Highness perceives that the quadrille is now over," interrupted Pauline, coldly: "and, as you yourself have observed, it will be better not to prolong our discourse on a very painful subject."

The Prince of Wales made no reply, but conducted the young lady to a seat, where he left her with a bow. Florimel was almost immediately afterwards by her side; and, with a look full of solicitude, he said, "My beloved Pauline, you have passed through a most painful ordeal—I know you have! That your worst suspicions are confirmed, I am certain—and that the Prince has been talking to you upon the subject, is apparent from your manner."

"Heavens! Gabriel," murmured the young lady, seriously alarmed: "do my looks indicate that the topic of conversation between his Royal Highness and myself was of a serious or unusual nature? If so, a strange and prejudical construction may be put thereon: and it may be supposed," she added, a

deep blush spreading over her countenance, "that I am one of those vain and silly women who would glory in their very frailty so long as it was a Prince that seduced them into error."

"Tranquillise yourself, dearest Pauline," said Florimel: "to the eyes of all this glittering throng there was nothing peculiar in your looks or manner—nothing to encourage a belief that his Royal Highness was addressing you otherwise than in the usual strain of empty compliment and frivolous gallantry which prevail at such scenes as this. But to me, Pauline—to *me*, who am your lover—your adorer—your intended husband,—and who likewise was aware of the motive which brought you hither,—to *me*, I say, it was different; and I saw that your cheeks flushed sometimes—then grew pale suddenly,—I saw also that you were profoundly excited in reality, though wearing an exterior of calmness and tranquillity. Yes—all this I observed, my Pauline—and I pitied you."

"Dearest Gabriel! your kind words recompense me for much of the pain which I have just endured," said the young lady. "But we shall be observed if we continue to discourse in a style that is naturally accompanied by a kindred seriousness of the countenance. Come," she added, a brilliant smile animating her lovely features; "give me your arm and let us take our place in the quadrille which is now forming—for I presume that we are to dance together this time."

And the bright and beautiful pair rose from their seats to join the second quadrille.

In the meantime the Prince of Wales, on leaving Pauline, bethought himself of the sudden and abrupt manner in which he had left Mrs. Fitzherbert some twenty minutes previously; and it now struck him that she was probably offended at the favour which he had shown to Miss Clarendon in selecting her as his partner, instead of some lady of high rank, for the first quadrille.

Returning, therefore, to the room where he had previously been seated with Mrs. Fitzherbert, he looked round for her in vain; and having traversed the entire suite of splendid saloons without perceiving her, he accosted the Duchess of Devonshire for information.

Drawing her Grace aside from a group of ladies with whom she was conversing, the Prince said, "Where is Mrs. Fitzherbert?"

"Indeed, I have not seen her since the commencement of the first quadrille," answered Georgiana. "And now that I recollect, she did not dance——"

"I can understand it all," interrupted the Prince, in a tone of vexation: "she is offended with me, because I chose to honour Miss Pauline Clarendon by selecting her for that quadrille—and she has doubtless retired to her own apartment in a pet. Now, my dear Georgiana, you must go and persuade her to return ere her absence be so prolonged as to occasion unpleasant comment."

"I had rather that your Royal Highness would find me a more agreeable employment," said the Duchess, pouting her beauteous lips: "for to tell you the truth," she added, sinking her voice to a low whisper, and fixing upon him a significant look, "it is no pleasant task to act as peace-maker between husband and wife."

"Georgiana," said the Prince, likewise in a low tone, but with almost a savage emphasis, and certainly with a ferocious look, "I command you not to speak thus of myself and Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"I was only anxious to hear what you would say in reply," observed the sprightly Duchess, by no means abashed, but with an enchanting gaiety of tone and manner and a species of wicked, mischief-loving archness which rendered her beautiful countenance absolutely radiant at the moment. "However," she exclaimed, tapping the Prince's arm with her fan,—"since I have rendered you angry, I will endeavour to atone for my indiscretion by acting as a peace-maker between your Royal Highness and Mrs Fitzherbert."

With these words, the Duchess of Devonshire turned away and quitted the room in order to seek the private apartments of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and the Prince of Wales, at that moment catching a glimpse of the Countess of Desborough's fine figure as she moved with mingled elegance and grace through the labyrinthine dance, was reminded of the plot he had set afloat in regard to her.

We have already observed that Eleanor looked perfectly splendid on the present occasion; and the royal voluptuary was fired with a devouring passion as his eyes now followed that magnificent form which seemed to glow with all the ardour of its own temperament beneath the exciting influence of the Muse Terpsichore.

Anxious to learn whether Mrs. Brace had succeeded in playing the part entrusted to her, the Prince quitted the ball-room—traversed the landing—and entered a private chamber, where a page was in attendance. This youth was despatched to summon Mrs. Brace to his royal master's presence; and in a few minutes the milliner made her appearance.

"What news concerning the charming Eleanor?" said the Prince, the moment they were alone together.

"Her ladyship has completely fallen into the snare," responded the unprincipled woman; "and she will meet me at midnight in the appointed place."

"So far, so good!" exclaimed his Royal Highness: then, referring to his watch, he observed, "It is now half-past eleven o'clock—mind you are punctual at your post."

"Fear nothing on that head," returned Mrs. Brace. "So far as the matter depends upon me, the beautiful Countess of Desborough will be in your power! That *she* also will be punctual, I have no doubt: for the mysterious words which, according to your instructions, I breathed in her ears, produced a magical effect. With all her pride and display of virtue, that haughty lady is not immaculate: conscious of some frailty, she trembles lest her secret be already known. Otherwise she would never have fallen into the trap which has this night been set to ensnare her."

"O charming Eleanor," exclaimed the Prince, carried away by the violence of his licentious longing,—"within an hour shall I clasp thee in my arms—within an hour shall I have revelled in thy beauties!"

"And is it possible that your Royal Highness can thus give free course to these thoughts and hopes, while a terrible danger appears to be menacing you?" demanded Mrs. Brace: "for surely you must have already seen Pauline Clarendon here to-night?—and can her visit bode any good to you?"

"I have seen her—and no danger is to be apprehended for the moment," answered the Prince.

"But she knows your Royal Highness to be Mr. Harley—or Mr. Harley to be your Royal Highness —- whichever you choose?" exclaimed the milliner.

"Yes—yes: all *that* she knows perfectly," said the heir-apparent; "and a very extraordinary girl she is. Gifted with a remarkable spirit—great presence of mind—and wonderful courage, she can defy, dare, and threaten a Prince. Nay, more—to my very face she told me that she hated me."

"And yet your Royal Highness declares that there is no danger!" cried Mrs. Brace, in a species of bewilderment.

"Not for the present, I tell you," exclaimed George, who was a firm believer in the Christian maxim which says, *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.* "Pauline will let me know very shortly what she wishes me to do in her sister's matter;—and when the time comes—why—*then* we'll think about it. You know I am not a man who meets misfortune half-way: I hate anticipating evil;—'tis bad enough when it comes. And now, my dear Fanny, I must thank you for the aid you have rendered me in my scheme respecting Lady Desborough."

With these words, his Royal Highness imprinted, a kiss upon the lips of the handsome milliner; and, having once more conjured her to be punctual at the place of appointment, he sped back to the brilliant saloons where the dancing was going on with increasing spirit.

The Duchess of Devonshire had already returned thither; and the Prince was speedily by her side.

"What news, my dear Georgiana?" demanded he.

"I cannot find Mrs. Fitzherbert in her apartments," answered the Duchess. "She is not there—and I am assured, in answer to the inquiries which I made, that her servants have not seen her since the commencement of the ball."

"Very strange!" ejaculated the Prince: then, in a calmer and far more indifferent tone, he observed, "But there are plenty of other rooms in Carlton House to which she could have retired for the purpose of enjoying her sulks;—and I shall not trouble myself farther in the matter. Thanks however, Georgiana, to you for your kindness in endeavouring to seek her."

The Prince remained in conversation with the charming and sprightly Duchess for about ten minutes longer—at the expiration of which period he again quitted the brilliant saloons.

CHAPTER LXXV.

ANOTHER SCENE AT CARLTON HOUSE.

THE Countess of Desborough had appeared radiantly beautiful to all eyes; but that carnation glow which suffused her cheeks with its richest hue, was heightened by the conflicting emotions that warred within her bosom, as well as by the effort which she made to conceal them.

In the little leisure which the excitement of the brilliant scene and the gay dance left her to commune with herself, she had vainly endeavoured to conjecture what could be the aim and nature of the mysterious warning given her by Mrs. Brace. Was it possible that her frailty with the individual whom she knew as Gustavus Wakefield, and whom she already loved with an earnest and devoted affection,—was it possible that this frailty could be known, or even suspected! And if not, then how could her fair fame be menaced?—and how could evil or danger be threatening her? Lastly, whatever were the peril, how happened it that Mrs. Brace, of all women in the world, should be able and willing to rescue her from its consequences?

These thoughts swept, with whirlwind speed, many times through the brain of the Countess of Desborough during the evening: but the oftener they recurred to her mind, the more bewildering did they seem—and the less easy was it to hazard a conjecture upon a single point.

Tortured with the cruellest suspense—harassed with the most painful misgiving—at one moment fearful that some treachery was intended—at another experiencing a full revival of confidence in the sincerity of the milliner,—now trembling lest the Prince of Wales himself should be at the bottom of the whole affair—then reassuring herself with the argument that he would never dare to devise any plot or perpetrate any outrage against her beneath his own roof and on such an occasion as the present,—at one time resolving to treat the thing with contempt—at another deciding upon keeping the appointment,—now painfully recalling to mind the milliner's former misconduct and duplicity—then starting at the recollection of the solemn and impressive manner in which the warning was given,—thus, torn with a thousand conflicting sentiments, the Countess of Desborough knew not how to act.

At length—when still undecided—her eyes encountered a time-piece: the hands marked midnight!

Rapidly sweeping her looks around, she saw that her husband was conversing at a distance with some other noblemen—that the Duchess of Devonshire was talking to Pauline Clarendon and Florimel—and that the Princess Sophia was engaged with a group of ladies in another quarter.

For the first time during the evening did the Countess, therefore, now find herself so entirely alone, as it were—amidst the brilliant throng—that she could escape without being perceived from the saloons.

Should she go?—should she keep the appointment?

Yes: an invincible feeling urged her to adopt the affirmative course—for her conscience, making a coward of her in one sense, prompted her to hasten and learn the nature of the peril which threatened her.

Behold her issuing forth from the gorgeous saloons. There are servants on the landing—in the ante-chambers: but what of that? She may be going to the toilette-room or to Mrs. Fitzherbert's apartments. It does not, therefore, seem strange that she should thus have left the saloons—alone!

The passage is gained: lightly and rapidly she threads it. Mrs. Brace is waiting for her at the end. The milliner places her finger with mysterious significance upon her lip—and hastily throws open a door. Eleanor crosses the threshold: the door closes noiselessly behind her.

But, without perceiving that she is alone—indeed, fancying that the milliner is following her—she traverses a small ante-chamber lighted by a lamp held in the hand of an alabaster statue. An open door faces her: she unhesitatingly enters the apartment with which it communicates;—but scarcely has she crossed the threshold when this

door is likewise closed behind her—and she is clasped in the arms of the Prince of Wales!

Eleanor saw that she was betrayed: but, without giving vent to shrieks or screams,—she was too courageous a woman for such an ebullition of pusillanimous feeling,—she disengaged herself with a desperate effort from his arms. Then, rapidly smoothing her disordered hair, she said in a low tone of remarkable decision, "I will sooner perish than become your victim!"

And her magnificent eyes darted forth lightnings upon the countenance of the heir-apparent.

"Haughty lady, you are in my power," he exclaimed, nothing discomfitted; "and no human aid can rescue you therefrom."

"What means your Royal Highness?" demanded Eleanor, drawing her fine form up to its full height, and assuming a bearing so splendid and queen-like in its dignified indignation, that for a few moments the unprincipled voluptuary was indeed overawed. "What means your Royal Highness?" she repeated, in a voice that trembled not: then, sweeping her eyes rapidly around, and perceiving that it was a bed-chamber to which foul treachery had thus inveigled her, she said, "If you intend to exert brute force to retain me here, then will I resist you to the utmost of my power. There are windows," she continued, pointing towards the casements; "and I will summon assistance thence. If no succour should come, I will precipitate myself therefrom sooner than become the victim of a miscreant voluptuary such as you!"

"By heaven! your words would provoke me strangely, proud and self-sufficient lady," exclaimed the Prince,—"were you not so completely in my power that I can take full and ample vengeance upon you. But, oh! you are so handsome—so divinely beautiful," he said, his voice suddenly assuming a melting tone and his countenance a tender expression,—"that I would not for worlds remain your enemy if you would only permit me to be your friend."

"My friend! repeated the Countess, with bitter irony: "is it to insult and mock one whom you have already cruelly outraged, that you use those words? But I understand you, Prince of Wales!" she exclaimed in a nobler, bolder, and loftier tone, while her countenance became lighted up with an animation that gave her the aspect of an avenging goddess:—"yes—I understand you now! You imagine that because you are his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—eldest son of the King of England—and heir-apparent to the throne on which that monarch sits,—you imagine, I say, that because you have only one more step to ascend in order to reach the pinnacle of earthly splendour and grasp the sceptre of an empire upon which the sun never sets,—you imagine that because the accident of birth has placed you in a position so proud as this, you have a right to trample upon all those usages, customs, or proprieties which may militate against your own selfish pleasures. Yes—this is your arrogance—this is your presumption. You fancy yourself a god—whereas you are but a very miserable and despicable man!"

So astounded was the Prince of Wales at being thus addressed, that he stood gazing in stupid wonderment upon the brave and spirited lady who dared to read him such a lesson: and this, let the reader recollect, was the second time that he had been reproved and set at defiance by female lips upon the memorable evening whose incidents we are describing.

"I have heard of Republican writers and Democratic speakers," continued the Countess of Desborough; "and hitherto I have been inclined to join in the common hatred which animates the aristocracy against them. But hear me, Prince of Wales—hear me while I solemnly proclaim and declare that I now cease to wonder that men should desire to abolish Monarchy and level thrones, when I think how vile, corrupt, and profligate Kings and Princes generally are. And now," she added, abruptly turning towards the door, "you will detain me at your peril."

"The door is locked," said the Prince, with a smile in which vindictive malignity and gloating licentiousness were strangely commingled. "I was concealed behind it when you entered—and expecting a scene, I took the precaution to secure it."

Thus speaking, he leant upon the mantel-piece and surveyed the Countess with the insolent freedom of a libertine and the cowardly menace of a bully.

"You are a villain!" she exclaimed, her face, neck, and bosom becoming scarlet with indignation. "Suffer me to depart—or I will no longer hesitate to raise my voice and summon assistance by my screams."

"The shrillest scream and the loudest shriek," said the Prince of Wales, in a tone of cold and ferocious triumph, "will not penetrate beyond these four walls. There are double casements to those windows: between this inner door and the outer one there is an ante-chamber. Scream, then—shriek—beauteous Eleanor—and all will be in vain!"

"Then will I resist you with my teeth—my nails!" exclaimed the Countess, her eyes shooting forth fiery arrows upon the Prince.

"Never have you appeared to me more lovely—more enchanting—more desirable than now," said his Royal Highness, perfectly unmoved by that threat. "Your cheeks blush a more delicious red with the fury of indignation—your eyes are as bright as meteors—your lips are of a livelier scarlet—and the teeth shine between them like dazzling pearls. Oh! you are a divine, a heavenly creature, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor;—far, far more beauteous at this moment than when you lay reclining in my arms upon the sofa at your own dwelling, and when I might have become the master of your charms had opportunity then served. In the name of God! why not manifest equal kindness towards me now?—wherefore compel me to wrest by force those enjoyments which it were paradise to have yielded voluntarily?"

"I confess that there was a time when—in a moment of weakness—I forgot my own dignity in your presence," said the Countess: "but, thank heaven! your triumph was not complete—nor shall it ever be!"

"And yet the proud and haughty Eleanor cannot look me in the face and declare that she has never proved faithless to her husband—never embraced a lover in her arms!" exclaimed the Prince of Wales, fixing a searching look upon the lady's countenance.

"What mean you?—what——"

And Eleanor, gasping for breath, supported herself by clinging to the mantel.

"Ah! then my surmise was not wrong?" cried the Prince, in a triumphant tone. "Oh! I am well acquainted with the world, Eleanor—well experienced in the female heart. The moment I learnt ere now that you had yielded to the device set to ensnare you, I felt assured that it was a conscious guilt which had made you coward enough to seek to know more. Were you an innocent woman, against whom scandal could not even raise its breath, you would have treated Mrs. Brace and her intrigues with disdain. Nay—those intrigues would have appeared so transparent that you must have seen through them in a moment."

"You are adding the grossest insult to the most wanton injury," murmured the unhappy Eleanor, her courage and presence of mind failing her rapidly.

"Had you not treated *me* with insult on that night when you promised to admit me to your chamber," said the Prince, "there never would have been a word or a look of anger or disagreement between us. But, because a certain incident took place—as unforeseen as it was unfortunate—you barred your door against me. Think you, haughty lady, that I had no feelings to wound—no bitter disappointment to endure? Assuredly I had: and it was in consequence of the cruel—heartless—capricious treatment which I then experienced at your hands, that I resolved to make you mine sooner or later. And now, Lady Desborough—since it appears to be *my* turn to speak at length," he continued in a tone of enhanced triumph,—"I crave your attention."

"My God! suffer me to depart!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, glancing in wild terror around the room.

"Listen, I say!" cried the Prince emphatically. "Upon *my* absence from the ball-rooms no one will dare to comment: upon *your* absence, on the contrary, strange whispers and remarks will speedily

circulate. The absence of *both of us* at the same time cannot fail to engender certain suspicions;—and I leave you to judge whether they will be more prejudicial to you or to me. Now, beauteous Eleanor, do you begin to see the position in which you are placed?"

"And despair nerves me with courage!" suddenly ejaculated the lovely woman, who did indeed appear lovelier still in her indignation. "You may keep me a prisoner here, Prince of Wales," she cried, darting looks of defiance at the heir-apparent: "but I take God to witness that, be the consequences what they may, the first use I shall make of my liberty will be to hasten into the presence of a magistrate or a judge and demand whether there be no law to reach even your Royal Highness."

"You are talking nonsense—utter nonsense, Eleanor!" said George, his lips curling with contempt. "In the first place, Kings, Queens, Princes, and Princesses may do just what they please—for they are *above* the law and *stronger* than the law; and the law was only made to keep the millions in subjection to *them!* Think you, then, that magistrates or judges would dare to entertain a charge against a Prince? No—no: they would sooner hang ten thousand innocent working-men, than even venture upon a reprimand to a guilty scion of Royalty."

"But if you detain me here—by force—against my will," exclaimed Eleanor, "the scandal—the shame—the infamy that will result——"

"Can all be dispersed and set at rest in a moment," interrupted his Royal Highness, with a promptitude showing that he had well considered the subject. "For how stands the matter? Mrs. Brace will step forward and declare that she managed the whole intrigue—that the Countess of Desborough of her own accord proceeded to a certain bed-chamber where she met the Prince of Wales—and that it is a mere maudlin sentiment of compunction, or else a feeling of jealousy, which makes her turn round upon her royal paramour to denounce him. There, Eleanor—the story is cut and dried—all in readiness;—and you see that everything can be accounted for as naturally as possible."

"Yes—I indeed perceive that you are capable of any villany," exclaimed the Countess, darting a look of deadly hatred upon the Prince of Wales. "I already knew you to be profligate—extravagant—selfish—ungrateful—and heartless: but it was reserved for the incident of this night to teach me that you are a villain."

"The sooner I close that abusive mouth with kisses the better!" cried the Prince, with a voice and look of vindictive triumph;—and, extending his arms, he rushed towards the Countess.

"Hold!" ejaculated a full-toned female voice;—and from behind the curtains of the bed stepped forth a lady whose flashing eyes, crimson countenance, and quivering lips proclaimed a rage not easy to be appeased.

It was Mrs. Fitzherbert!

A cry of joy and triumph burst from the lips of the Countess of Desborough: but a terrible oath—an imprecation so fearful that we dare not attempt to record it—fell from the tongue of the Prince of Wales.

"Madam, you have doubtless heard all that has passed between his Royal——I mean, between *this man*," exclaimed Eleanor, pointing disdainfully and loathingly at the Prince,—"and myself?"

"Yes—every syllable," answered Mrs. Fitzherbert, darting furious glances on the heir-apparent, who folded his arms, leant against the mantel, and endeavoured to assume an air of indifference.

"You will therefore agree with me, madam," continued the Countess, "that I have been subjected to an outrage as vile as the spirit which suggested it must be cowardly and despicable?"

"We will not use hard words, if your ladyship pleases," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, bending a severe look upon Eleanor; "for, according to one portion of the dialogue which ere now took place between yourself and his Royal Highness, it would appear that he has received some considerable amount of encouragement on the part of your ladyship. Nay—it would even seem," she added, with a caustic emphasis, "that on one particular occasion his Royal Highness should have become the partner of your ladyship's bed, had not some unforeseen incident prevented so agreeable a result."

"Madam," said the Countess of Desborough, recovering all her dignity, and fixing her magnificent eyes with grand effect upon Mrs. Fitzherbert,—"if you yourself be immaculate, then wherefore is it that you are not styled her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales?—but if, on the other hand, you have no claim to that distinction, how dare you undertake the part of moralist with me? Tell me that you are the wife of his Royal Highness, and you will then bring a blush to my cheek, and I shall fall upon my knees and implore your pardon for ever having wronged you in thought, though never in deed: but if you be only Mrs. Fitzherbert—the mistress of the heir-apparent——"

"Silence, madam!" cried the lady whom Eleanor thus boldly addressed in such words of sarcasm: then, stamping her foot imperiously, Mrs. Fitzherbert drew herself up to her full height—and, in a tone and manner of the loftiest dignity, she exclaimed, "It is time that your ladyship should learn whom you have insulted and outraged—for I am indeed her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales!"

"My God! what have you said?—what madness have you perpetrated?" exclaimed the heir-apparent, suddenly becoming fearfully excited: and, seizing Mrs. Fitzherbert—for so we had better continue to call her, inasmuch as she was never known by any higher name to the world,—seizing her by the wrist, we say, the Prince muttered in a low, hoarse, and thick tone, "I am aware that my conduct has been bad this evening towards you: but your vengeance is terrible in the extreme! For by proclaiming yourself to be my wife, you have endangered my very heritage of the British crown!"

A deadly pallor came over the countenance of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she was thus painfully reminded of the tremendous indiscretion of which she had been guilty: but almost instantly recovering her presence of mind, she took the Countess of Desborough's hands in both her own, saying, "Let us pardon each other for the harsh words which we have exchanged—and let us henceforth be friends."

"Oh! cheerfully—cheerfully!" cried the generous-hearted Eleanor, in a tone of fervent sincerity. "Your Royal Highness——"

"Hush!" exclaimed the other: "you must never fail to call me *Mrs. Fitzherbert!* I will not ask you to swear to keep this secret—because I know that your ladyship is a woman of honour, and it would be an insult to exact a vow to that effect: but I will

implore you—by that friendship which I now proffer you and which I ask you to vouchsafe me in return ——"

"Fear not, dear lady, that I shall ever breathe a word calculated to give you offence," interrupted the Countess of Desborough: then, without deigning even to notice the Prince of Wales, she said, "You will have the kindness to accompany me back to the ball rooms; so that, if my absence has been perceived, it may be supposed that I have been in your society during the interval."

"Certainly," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, instantly recognising the prudence of the step thus suggested; then, turning towards the Prince of Wales, she said in a cold tone of reproach, "Have you no apology to offer to this generous-hearted lady?"

"The Countess of Desborough will accept none at my hands," said the heir-apparent, doggedly.

"It were a miserable affectation on my part—indeed, it would amount to a piece of sycophancy of which I am utterly incapable," observed Eleanor, "were I to declare that any apology, however humble, could appease the indignation which I experience. On *that* head, therefore, my dear Mrs. Fitzherbert, let no more be said. Henceforth the Prince of Wales will treat me with ceremonious courtesy — and I shall behave towards him with reserved and cold respect. Let such be the understanding; and on that condition, I shall never breathe a word relative to the incidents of this night. And it will be the fault of his Royal Highness," she added significantly, "if I do not carry the secret thereof to my grave."

"I understand your ladyship," said the Prince, assuming a stern and haughty air: "but be well assured that, after everything which has passed in this chamber within the last half-hour, I am now led to hate you as cordially as ever I felt interested in you."

"The hatred of your Royal Highness will prove much more tolerable to me than your love," exclaimed Eleanor, the natural pride and dignity of her sex dictating this cutting taunt.

And the Prince felt the withering sarcasm and writhed under it—although he affected to turn aside and hum an opera-air. But, Oh! for *him*—the worshipped, idolized, and deified heir-apparent to be thus treated with indifference,—for *him*—the handsomest man and most fascinating gentleman in Europe to be thus spurned as it were by that indignant and haughty but noble-minded lady,—Oh! it was intolerable;—and the very tune which he affected to hum, hissed between his lips like a reptile's craving for vengeance!

But, without waiting to observe the result which her retort had produced, the Countess of Desborough unlocked the door—threw it open—and made way for Mrs. Fitzherbert to pass. But this lady whispered, with a half-smile, "Remember that I am not to be known by you as the Princess of Wales;"—and the Countess accordingly went forth first, Mrs. Fitzherbert following close behind.

The ante-chamber was traversed, and Eleanor was about to open the outer-door, when the Prince of Wales suddenly exclaimed, "Stop for a single moment!"

The two ladies paused accordingly: but Mrs. Fitzherbert only turned towards him.

And it was to her that a sudden idea had prompted him to utter a few words.

"You are about to seek again the company whom I have invited to Carlton House this evening," he said, in a low and impressive tone. "Now, it either becomes necessary for me to return amongst them also—or for you to circulate a rumour of sudden indisposition as a plea for my absence."

"And wherefore can you not return to the ball-rooms—*presently?*" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a cold tone, and with a strong emphasis upon the last word, as much as to imply that he must not think of offering to accompany herself and Eleanor, as his presence would not be otherwise than displeasing to the latter.

"Yes—I will return presently," said the Prince,—"if I am assured that I shall not become the focus for your angry looks."

"Would you have me very amiable towards you?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of bitter irony. "Oh! you deserve it ——"

"Perdition!—begone—leave me!" ejaculated his Royal Highness: and retreating, in a towering rage, into the bed-chamber, he slammed the door violently.

"Come, dear Lady Desborough," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, exercising wonderful command over her feelings: "we must saunter back to the ball-rooms with countenances as serene and smiling as if nothing unusual had occurred. It may be that some of my friends have been to seek me in my own apartments—and we will therefore say, if questioned, that we have visited the picture-gallery. By the bye, that young lady whom you introduced this evening is a sweet pretty creature," observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, casting a rapid and searching glance at Eleanor's countenance, in order to ascertain if there had been any particular motive in presenting Pauline Clarendon to the Prince.

"She is not only beautiful—but as amiable and virtuous as she is lovely," said the Countess. "In a few weeks she will become Lady Florimel."

"So much the better," thought Mrs. Fitzherbert; "for the Prince was certainly struck with her."

But she did not breathe these sentiments aloud;—and now the two ladies once more entered the glittering sphere of beauty, rank, and fashion.

Mrs. Fitzherbert's intimate knowledge of the Prince's disposition enabled her to judge that he would not return to the ball-rooms again that night,—but that he would retire to his own apartments and drown his disappointment, rage, and humiliation in the bottle or the punch-bowl: she accordingly spread the report that his Royal Highness had been seized with a sudden indisposition; and the entertainment therefore broke up at an earlier hour than it would otherwise have done.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

A STRANGE VISITRESS.—A WELCOME PROPOSAL.

THE scene now changes to Mr. Clarendon's house in Cavendish Square.

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the morning—breakfast was over—and the father, leaving his two lovely daughters in the parlour, retired to a room which had been fitted up as his library or study.

Mr. Clarendon's countenance has already been described as thin, sallow, and having an indelible stamp of melancholy traced upon its lineaments: but it now appeared actually care-worn and expressed

all the indications of a mind ill at ease. Nevertheless, in the presence of his daughters he assumed a certain appearance of gaiety—or rather of composure and tranquillity—which led them to believe that he had naught to vex or annoy him;—and it was only when alone that his features fell, as it were, into an aspect mournfully harmonizing with the real state of his thoughts.

Thus was it on the morning of which we are writing, and which was the one following the grand entertainment at Carlton House:—for, having chatted at the breakfast-table with his daughters in a manner that might be termed almost cheerful, he retired to his library to give way to the most melancholy reflections.

Indeed, Mrs. Brace, the wily milliner of Pall Mall, had not been misled by her worldly experience when she conjectured—without ever having seen Mr. Clarendon in her life—that he felt his present position to be altogether a false one.

And such it indeed was: for he had only been acknowledged as a relative and well treated by Lord Marchmont at a time when circumstances seemed to proclaim him as the heir to the old peerage and the fine estates which were the appanage of that rank;—but now that the Hon. Arthur Eaton was completely recovered from his perilous and mysterious malady, it had already struck Mr. Clarendon that Lord Marchmont was growing colder and colder towards him each time they met. True it was that Arthur's manner became more friendly and cordial, if possible, every day—and he *was* almost a diurnal visitor at the house in Cavendish Square: but still the young gentleman's amiability recompensed not Mr. Clarendon for the old lord's increasing indifference.

What, then, was to be done? To return to his cottage and his comparative penury, was an idea too galling for Mr. Clarendon to entertain for many minutes at a time—although there were occasions when he *did* contemplate it seriously, considering it to be preferable to the painful alternative of living as it were upon a species of eleemosynary charity—or at all events, in an utter dependence on his haughty relative. But, no—he could not calmly and deliberately consent to abandon the improved position in which circumstances had placed him after so long and severe a struggle with the world. Besides, was not Pauline engaged to marry a young peer of immense wealth?—and might not Octavia hope to form an equally brilliant match?

So at least Mr. Clarendon thought: and, looking upon the world and all its denizens with that distrust which a long series of misfortunes invariably engenders in the human mind, he feared lest his daughters' prospects should be ruined were his own position in society to undergo any alteration for the worst. He knew not that Florimel, for instance, had loved Pauline when she was an obscure, humble, and unknown maiden, or that he now loved her for her own sake alone: on the contrary, he fancied that if Pauline were to return to the villa in the Edgeware Road and lay aside her silk dress to resume a cotton one, she would not then appear sufficiently beautiful in the young nobleman's eyes to compensate for her own want of fortune and the penury of her sire.

These considerations, therefore, induced Mr. Clarendon to cling to the position in which Lord Marchmont had so suddenly, and under such peculiar circumstances, placed him: but still he felt that it was a position not only false and embarrassing, but even cruel. For the allowance of a thousand a-year might be withdrawn by Lord Marchmont in any moment of caprice; and even if it were continued until this old nobleman's death, there might be no stipulation in his will to ensure its subsequent payment. True it was that Arthur Eaton appeared to have conceived a great attachment towards the Clarendon family: but he was young—he might marry, and thus bestow his sympathies elsewhere—or a thousand other circumstances might tend to induce him to stop the pecuniary allowance now made.

All these considerations were perplexing and vexatious enough: but even that did not constitute the sum of Mr. Clarendon's painful reflections. For was it a small thing that a peerage should have been snatched, as it were, from his very grasp?—was it a trifling matter that a coronet should have descended to within an inch of his brow and then have been suddenly withdrawn? Yet such was the fact:—a few weeks back—and Arthur Eaton appeared to hover on the very verge of the grave. Death seemed to hold him in his grasp—and thus the frailest, weakest barrier in the world alone stood between Mr. Clarendon and the heirship-apparent to the Marchmont title and estates.

But how speedily was the aspect of circumstances changed! Death released its hold upon the victim who seemed past all human redemption; and Arthur Eaton was rapidly returning to a new and vigorous state of existence. Mr. Clarendon's hopes, at one time so brilliant, were thus doomed to experience a terrible annihilation;—and it was not without the bitterest pangs and the most intense secret anguish that this man, naturally ambitious and of an aristocratic mind, beheld the downfall of that glorious fabric which circumstances had justified his imagination in building up.

Upon retiring to his library on the morning whereof we are now writing, Mr. Clarendon fell into the train of thoughts which we have just sketched:—and in this painful reverie had he been wrapt for nearly half-an-hour, when a domestic entered to announce that a lady, who refused to give her name, desired an immediate interview with him.

He ordered the servant to show the visitress into the library; and when she made her appearance, he was immediately struck by the mingled elegance, dignity, and grace which characterised her form: but her countenance Mr. Clarendon could not see—for it was carefully concealed by a thick black veil so folded as to render it impossible to catch a glimpse of the features through the transparency of the lace.

That she was young, he had not the slightest doubt—for her figure possessed all the symmetry of youthfulness: the waist was very slender—the shoulders had a fine width and an admirable slope—the bust was well-formed without being exuberant—and she walked with that lightness yet firmness of step which finely proportioned limbs can alone command. Besides, her feet and ankles, peeping beneath her dark silk dress, were small even to a fault—and the hands, though imprisoned in black kid gloves, were evidently modelled with a corresponding delicacy and perfection.

Mr. Clarendon placed a chair for her accommo-

dation; and, resuming his own seat, he waited with no inconsiderable degree of curiosity for the first words that should fall from her lips.

"Scarcely knowing how to introduce the object of my visit, Mr. Clarendon," said the veiled lady, in a voice rich with all the soft melody and beautiful with all the harmonious freshness of youth,—"I must commence by apologising for this intrusion. But you will pardon me if I neither reveal my name nor raise my veil upon the present occasion. Indeed, my business with you is full of mystery——"

"But of what nature is that business, Miss—or Madam—for I know not by which distinction to address you," interrupted Mr. Clarendon, not altogether liking the opening scene in this strange interview.

"Call me *Miss*, if you will," said the lady. "And do not," she immediately exclaimed, "imbibe any hasty notion to my prejudice, on account of the mystery with which it at present suits me to envelope myself. It may be that we shall become far more intimately connected: on the other hand it may be that we shall part presently—never to meet again."

"And on what do these alternatives depend?" inquired Mr. Clarendon, a strange and unaccountable feeling coming over him,—a feeling made up of something more than mingled surprise, curiosity, and suspense,—one of those mystic and superhuman sensations, in fine, which visit us but once or twice during our lives, but which, when they *do* shed their influence over us, seem to warn us that we have reached some point or crisis in our destiny which will decide the whole current and channel of the future flow of existence.

"You ask on what those alternatives depend?" repeated the veiled lady: and Mr. Clarendon knew by her attitude and manner that she was fixing her eyes upon him searchingly through her veil. "They depend solely on yourself," she added, after a pause of nearly a minute.

"Madam, allow me to tell you frankly that the mystery which you are adopting begins to be irksome and embarrassing to me," said Mr. Clarendon. "If you wish to speak to me on some private matter, I will pledge my word most sacredly and my honour most solemnly to look upon the communication as confidential and secret."

"And if that communication were of a startling character?" said the lady, in a tone of inquiry.

"These are times when it requires a great deal to startle anybody," responded Mr. Clarendon.

"Am I to understand that *your* experience of the world is such as to render it difficult either to startle or shock you?" demanded the mysterious unknown.

"I need not hesitate to answer you in the affirmative," said Mr. Clarendon, who failed not to comprehend that his visitress was seeking for encouragement to proceed. "Yes—my acquaintance with the world is not of the most pleasant description; and I have seen enough to convince me that heartlessness and selfishness thrive the best, while generosity and honour fall lamentably into the background. I liken Generosity to a man who commits slow suicide by means of infinitesimal doses of poison, which however must prove eventually fatal: for Generosity ruins and destroys itself, to reap nothing but ingratitude. As for Honour—'tis a mere word," added Mr. Clarendon, with intense bitterness, "which every man and every class of men interpret differently."

"Ah! now I begin to understand you better—and I am glad that you have made these observations," said the lady. "You have evidently been taught by experience to look upon the world as the arena in which selfish interests wage a more terrible conflict than that of the Roman gladiators. And you are right, Mr. Clarendon. But, having adopted these views, you would doubtless feel grateful to any one who might point out the means of ameliorating your own condition?"

"By heaven! I would worship such a friend as if it were an angel sent from heaven!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon: then, almost repenting of the enthusiasm into which his feelings had at the moment betrayed him, he said in a different and colder tone, "But wherefore do you put such strange questions to me? If you know aught of my circumstances——"

"I know everything!" interrupted the veiled visitress. "I am well acquainted with all the details of your position—and I am convinced, after the admissions you have already made, that it is painful and intolerable to a degree."

"But it may be dangerous for me *to make farther admissions* to you, lady!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, fearful that he had been guilty of some imprudence in expressing with such freedom his ideas of the world and the views resulting from his experience of it. "Before we continue a discourse which has taken so strange a turn, permit me to inquire who you are?"

"I have already warned you that it will neither suit my purposes to reveal my name or raise my veil upon the present occasion," said the lady, in a firm and decisive tone. "Indeed, our interview may as well end here," she added, rising abruptly from her seat: then, again appearing to scan Mr. Clarendon's features with an earnest attention through her closely folded veil, she observed in a low, solemn, and mysterious tone, "That you are discontented, I perceive: but whether you have the courage to undertake the work which can alone place you on that eminence to which your ambition aspires, I am unable at present to judge. If you do indeed possess that courage, I am willing to aid you upon certain conditions. Therefore, whether we shall meet again must depend upon yourself. For the remainder of this week and throughout the next shall I each morning look into the *Times* newspaper: if no communication be made to me through its advertising columns, I shall conclude that you are a mere grumbler who dares not act—a poltroon who can complain but who lacks the energy necessary to improve his condition and accomplish his desires. On the other hand, if a communication should appear in that journal, addressed to the '*Veiled Lady*,' it will instantaneously be attended to. Farewell."

And, with this abrupt peroration, the mysterious visitress quitted the room, leaving Mr. Clarendon so completely a prey to the profoundest amazement that he remained fixed as it were in his chair, unable to rise and perform the usual courteous ceremony of opening the door of the apartment or ringing the bell for a domestic to attend upon her egress from the house.

By degrees Mr. Clarendon recovered from the

stupor of surprise and bewilderment into which he had been thrown by the closing scene of that strange interview; and he then began to reflect with an intense and absorbing interest on everything which had fallen from the lady's lips. He passed in review all the details of her remarks—he weighed her words with a minute carefulness—he considered all the possible bearings and every probable tendency which they might have. It was not difficult to perceive that she was well acquainted with his position; and she had also managed to probe the nature of his secret thoughts to no mean depth.

But who was she?—and what assistance could she possibly lend Mr. Clarendon in order *to raise him to that eminence to which his ambition aspired?* For in order to gratify that ambition, the coronet of a peer must be placed upon his brow: and who was this lady that could render him an aid so efficient as to reach so grand a consummation?

Unable to form even the remotest or wildest conjecture in this respect, Mr. Clarendon was relapsing into that bewilderment of the ideas from which he had just managed to emerge,—when the door opened, and the Hon. Mr. Eaton was announced.

Wonderful was the change which had recently taken place in this young gentleman. The ruddy glow of health was upon his cheeks: his eyes had lost all their wild and feverish brilliancy, and shone with a natural lustre;—his lips were of a wholesome red;—and his figure, though modelled in slight proportions, had lost its attenuation, debility, and appearance of caducity. Instead of the worn out and emaciated being he had so lately seemed, he was now a fine young man—remarkably handsome, and possessed of every personal attraction calculated to touch the female heart, as he was also endowed with every mental quality to enable him to win and retain it.

"Mr. Clarendon," said Arthur, when the usual complimentary greetings were exchanged, "I have paid my respects to you in the first instance this morning, because I am anxious to have a few moments' conversation with you before I join my fair cousins. The truth is," continued the Hon. Mr. Eaton, his countenance assuming a certain seriousness, though not of an expression which heralded any bad tidings,—"the truth is, I wish to put one candid question to you in the hope of receiving as frank a reply."

"Proceed, my dear Arthur," said Mr. Clarendon, somewhat amazed at the singularity of this prefatory observation. "I am convinced you cannot for an instant suppose that any frankness on your part will be met otherwise than with a congenial ingenuousness on mine."

"Oh! assuredly not, my dear sir!" exclaimed Eaton, whose voice of rich masculine melody constrasted strangely with the weak and enfeebled tones in which he had so recently been wont to speak, when labouring under the fatal effects of the slow poison, *alias* the Heir's Friend. "But you are well aware," he continued, "that when a person wishes to enter upon a delicate and confidential subject, he prefaces it with some precautionary remarks which are nevertheless in most instances unnecessary and uncalled for."

"And you are desirous of speaking to me on a delicate and confidential subject?" said Mr. Clarendon, wondering what on earth could be the topic thus mysteriously alluded to.

"Yes: are you surprised?" demanded Arthur, with a smile. "But not to keep you any longer in suspense, my dear Mr. Clarendon, I will at once frankly inform you that it is respecting your elder daughter, the charming Octavia——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his countenance lighting up with a satisfaction which he could not conceal: for it instantaneously struck him that Arthur Eaton was about to demand Octavia's hand in marriage—and, with the rapidity of lightning, did his thoughts calculate all the advantages of such a connexion,—advantages, indeed, which would go far towards putting an end to that falseness of position in which Mr. Clarendon was situated with regard to the Marchmont family.

"In one word, then, my dear sir," resumed Arthur, after a moment's pause,—"do you believe that Miss Clarendon's affections are disengaged?"

"Certainly!—most assuredly!" exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, not for an instant deeming it possible that his daughter could be in love without his knowing it. "I acquainted you yesterday with the pleasing intelligence that Lord Florimel had on the previous day formally demanded my permission to pay his addresses to Pauline: but Octavia is as yet 'fancy free, as Shakspere terms the virginity of the affections," added Mr. Clarendon, little suspecting how tremendously he erred in his belief and how completely he was deceived in that respect.

"You are certain that Octavia has formed no preference amongst the circle of her acquaintance?" said Arthur Eaton, inquiringly.

"I feel convinced that she has not," responded Mr. Clarendon, really believing what he was saying. "But wherefore have you asked me the samo question *twice?*"

"Simply because I would guard myself against proceeding in error or misconception," answered the young gentleman. "There have been moments—especially lately—when it has struck me that Octavia was pensive—thoughtful——"

"I can assure you that I have noticed nothing of the kind," interrupted Mr. Clarendon, emphatically: "and, even if she do seem pre-occupied now and then, I will stake my existence it is not in consequence of any attachment secretly formed. Oh! no—she would conceal nothing from me——"

"As her father, you must decidedly know best," said Arthur. "Taking it for granted, then, that Miss Clarendon's affections are disengaged," he continued, in a tone of manly firmness, "I demand your permission to seek an interview with her for the purpose of offering her my hand."

"My dear Arthur," exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, his sallow countenance becoming radiant with joy, "I am delighted—nay, so overcome by this unlooked-for—this unexpected happiness—that I am at a loss for words to convey all I feel——"

"Then I have your permission," interrupted the young gentleman, pressing his relative's hands with cordial warmth: "and I shall hasten to avail myself of it!"

"Go, dear Arthur—go!" cried Mr. Clarendon, almost pushing him towards the door of the library: "you will find your cousins in the parlour—and Octavia will feel herself honoured and happy in the preference which you thus manifest in her favour,

when the fashionable world abounds in heiresses amongst whom you might select and choose at will."

But the latter portion of this sentence was lost upon Arthur Eaton, who, anxious to perform what he considered to be *a duty*, was already crossing the threshold of the library on his way to the parlour.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE SISTERS.

WHEN breakfast was over on the morning of which we are writing,—and when Mr. Clarendon had left his daughters together, as already described at the commencement of the preceding chapter,—Pauline took her sister's hand and gazed so long and with a look so full of tenderness upon her countenance, that the latter suddenly felt assured either that something was amiss or that a revelation of importance was about to be made.

"My dearest Pauline," she exclaimed, "there is a peculiarity in your manner this morning——"

"Which alarms you, Octavia?" interrupted the younger sister, finishing the other's sentence for her. "But tranquillise yourself——"

"Ah! then you have some evil tidings to communicate, Pauline?" suddenly ejaculated Octavia, the colour disappearing from her cheeks. "Is it concerning yourself—or relative to me, my beloved sister? Speak—oh! speak quickly—and keep me not in suspense!"

"Hush!—not so loud!—we may be overheard," said Pauline, endeavouring to calm her sister's excitement: then, placing herself by Octavia's side, she murmured in a tremulous tone, and taking her hand, "It almost breaks my heart to have anything disagreeable to unfold to you——"

"My God! what do you mean?" demanded the elder Miss Clarendon, her anxiety and suspense now becoming utterly intolerable. "Oh! you are weeping, Pauline — you are weeping!" she exclaimed, throwing a look of wild excitement upon her sister: "the tears are raining down your cheeks—and it is for me that they fall! Tell me—tell me, dear Pauline—what has happened?"

"I conjure you to tranquillise yourself, Octavia," said Pauline, embracing her sister tenderly. "You know how devotedly I love you—how much I would undergo to save you a single pang——"

"And it is the same with me, Pauline," interrupted Octavia. "Feeling our motherless condition, we have ever loved each other with the fondest and most tender affection: and it is now by this affection—by this love, Pauline, that I conjure you to relieve me from suspense——"

"I will—I will," exclaimed the younger sister, whose cheeks were flushed with grief, as those of Octavia were pale with apprehension. "You believed that I went to the Opera last night: and it was not so."

"Then whither did you go?" inquired Octavia, amazement for an instant absorbing the intensity of her excitement: and she fixed her magnificent blue eyes upon Pauline's countenance.

"There was a grand entertainment at Carlton House last evening," began the younger Miss Clarendon; "and ——"

"And you obtained an introduction thither?" exclaimed Octavia, a terrible tremor now coming over her, at the same time that an awful suspicion of the truth swept in upon her startled soul.

"Yes — I went to Carlton House," continued Pauline: "determined to clear up the dreadful mystery —— And, Oh! my beloved sister — my wronged, lost, betrayed Octavia ——"

But, suffocated by her grief, Pauline stopped short; and, throwing herself upon her sister's neck, she wept convulsively.

"I understand it all ——My God! I understand it all!" murmured Octavia, falling back upon the sofa, with her affectionate and kind-hearted sister clinging to her in the wildest paroxysm of grief.

A minute passed—and no sound fell from Octavia's lips: motionless likewise was she.

As the searing lightning darts vivid and sudden through the night of storm, and rain, and tempest—so, amidst the tumultuous anguish of Pauline's heart, did the blasting thought that Octavia was dead flash across her imagination.

Starting from the convulsive embrace in which she was holding her sister,—starting thence, we say, as if suddenly impelled away by an irresistible galvanic shock,—Pauline threw a terrified look on Octavia's countenance.

The unhappy young lady was not dead—nor even in a swoon: but she was stunned—stupified—paralysed by the weight of ineffable misery.

Spell-bound, as if under the incantation of some hellish spirit, was she!

And all in a moment she had passed through the most torturing phase of her existence—she had endured the crucifixion of that indescribable anguish which accompanies the sudden annihilation of the heart's fondest hopes—and she had as rapidly sunk into that species of stupor which is a palsy alike of the heart and of the brain!

Her eyes glared vacantly—her mouth was half-open—her bosom stood upheaved with the suspended breath.

"Octavia—my sister—my beloved sister!" exclaimed Pauline, wildly: "in the name of God, speak to me."

These words, uttered with all the passionate enthusiasm of the young maiden's fervent love and rending grief, seemed suddenly to break that spell which held Octavia in a waking, statue-like trance.

Deep sighs of returning breath broke from her, convulsing her bosom fearfully; and as the blood flowed back into the veins, the excruciating sense of bitter, bitter anguish returned to the heart. Then the eyes, like two arteries of the soul suddenly opening, poured forth their pearly torrents; and the pent-up agonies of Octavia's tremendous affliction found a vent affording that relief which ever follows tears, even in the midst of the direst woe that the human breast can possibly experience.

And Pauline suffered her to weep uninterruptedly for many minutes.

"I need not ask you to describe in words the terrible truth which my heart's worst fears have already made me comprehend, alas! too well," said the wretched Octavia, at length breaking the silence which prevailed: and, raising her tear-bedewed countenance towards Pauline's, she added, in a low and scarcely audible tone, "I should have been better prepared for this cruel blow!"

"Yes, my beloved sister," answered Pauline: "for

I know that you have recently experienced many sad misgivings and painful forebodings——"

"But it is so hard to abandon those delicious hopes which are indeed necessary to one's existence!" exclaimed Octavia, in a voice fraught with the terrible accents of despair.

"Remember, my dearest sister," said Pauline, her tone suddenly becoming hoarse, thick, and almost ferocious,—"remember," she repeated, more emphatically than at first, "that the Prince of Wales is now undeserving of your love. But if you should still feel that your heart clings to his image ——"

"My God! how can I ever efface that image from my soul?" exclaimed Octavia, now gazing in astonishment upon Pauline. "What, my dear sister—do you suppose that I can pluck forth this love of mine from my heart,—as if it were a flower which *his* faithless hand had placed in my bosom,—and trample it under foot? Oh! no—no: it were impossible! Look into the depths of your own soul, Pauline—consider well the nature of that affection which you bear for Gabriel—and then tell me whether it is something which you can break like glass, snap like a twig, or crush like a delicate rosebud."

"No—no—it is not," murmured Pauline, her voice becoming soft and tremulous again; "and I was wrong—or rather foolish—to hope for an instant that you could so easily triumph over your heart's fondest affections. But, tell me, my dear sister—tell me how you mean to act——"

"Did you speak to—to—*him* last night?" inquired Octavia, in a stifling voice.

"Yes—and he offered to make any reparation which lay in his power," responded Pauline.

"What reparation can he make?" exclaimed Octavia, bitterly. "He found my heart a temple prepared for the holiest, sincerest, most impassioned worship which ever constituted the love that woman bears for man—and he has left that heart a ruin! Oh! my beloved sister, counsel—advise—instruct me: for I have no friend on earth in whom I can confide save thou!"

And, with tears again streaming from her eyes, Octavia threw herself upon the bosom of Pauline.

"I know not what course to recommend——My God! I am as much bewildered as yourself," exclaimed the latter, as she clasped her unhappy sister in an embrace which love and grief rendered convulsively passionate.

"But does he love me?—or has his affection subsided?" asked Octavia, slowly raising her head and looking intently upon Pauline's countenance. "Oh! you do not answer me—you avert your eyes—and your manner convinces me that even his very love is dead!"

"No—no, Octavia," exclaimed Pauline, emphatically,—"I do not mean you to understand *that!* But if his affection for you be ever so strong, you cannot enjoy it in honour to yourself! Ah! it was *this*—it was *this* that was uppermost in my mind when I averted my looks and dared not answer you. For listen to me attentively, my well-beloved sister," continued the young lady, wiping her eyes and summoning all her mental energies to her aid.

"Speak—speak," murmured Octavia. "I feel as if *you* were the elder sister—or as if you were a mother to me: for this cruel blow has sadly changed me within the last quarter of an hour! Speak, then, my dearest Pauline—and your words will console and strengthen me."

"In the first place, Octavia," said the younger Miss Clarendon, "it is absolutely necessary that you should exercise an immense control over your feelings. To this point you must tutor yourself at once—without delay. Our father may return to the room—visitors may be announced unexpectedly—and the strangest suspicions would be excited were we found sad, and weeping, and afflicted thus sorely. Courage, then—dear sister—courage!" exclaimed Pauline; "and nerve yourself to look this tremendous misfortune in the face—to contemplate it with as much calmness as you can call to your aid—to examine it in all its bearings—to study all its tendencies—and to arrive at some settled opinion how to act."

"Yes—yes: I will be calm—I will be tranquil," murmured Octavia, sobbing profoundly between the broken assurances which she thus gave her sister. "But, my God! the calamity is dreadful, Pauline—dear Pauline; and I know not whether it will end in suicide or madness!"

"O heavens! talk not thus wildly, my beloved Octavia!" exclaimed the younger Miss Clarendon, embracing her sister and lavishing upon her the most endearing caresses. "Come—let us converse seriously—quietly—calmly——"

"But have you anything to suggest?" demanded Octavia, hastily—a ray of hope flashing in upon her soul.

"Alas! I am myself almost bewildered," said Pauline. "And yet there are two alternatives for an injured woman to choose between in your case."

"Two alternatives!" exclaimed Octavia. "Oh! yes," she added bitterly:—"I have already mentioned them—madness or suicide!"

"Sister, you will distract me—you will render me unfit to counsel or console you!" cried Pauline. "In the name of God, Octavia," she exclaimed, throwing her arms round the unhappy young lady's neck, "do not talk thus—but fulfil your promise——"

"What promise did I make?" inquired Octavia, impatiently.

"That you would be calm and tranquil—that you would listen to me with attention," said Pauline, in the most endearing tone. "Were we not talking just now of the love which we bear for each other——"

"Yes, dearest Pauline—and I am wrong, very wrong to say anything to distress you," interrupted Octavia, returning her sister's caresses. "Now, Pauline, I am calm—indeed I am: I will listen to you with attention, my dear good sister. You were telling me that there are two alternatives for my contemplation. I can see none. My brain whirls—I am bewildered!"

And she laid her head upon Pauline's shoulder.

"Rest yourself there, my beloved sister," said the young lady; "and listen while I explain myself to you. Do not interrupt me—but hear me to the end: and I will speak slowly that you may follow me easily and readily as I proceed—for I can well understand, my poor Octavia, that this blow has fallen with tremendous weight upon your brain. I was saying, then, that there are two alternatives for you to contemplate. The first is to seek redress at the hands of the Prince of Wales—the second is to devour your grief in secret. You may ask me what

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reparation he can make you, otherwise than by leading you to the altar: I answer emphatically that he can be forced to espouse you!"

"Inpossible!" exclaimed Octavia, starting up as if obedient to the sudden influence of a galvanic battery: then, clasping her hands together, she cried, "No—no, my beloved sister: you are deceiving yourself—you are deceiving me;—for did you not just now declare that, even if his affection were still mine, I could not enjoy it in honour to myself."

"Yes — I spoke thus — in haste — and without remembering at the instant that there was a possibility of adopting ulterior means," said Pauline. "Besides—I was anxious to probe all the varied feelings of your mind——"

"But you have spoken of ulterior means?" interrupted Octavia: "Oh! tell me—keep me not in suspense, dear sister—those means——And yet," she exclaimed, frantically interrupting herself and dashing her open palms wildly against her polished brow; "it were madness to entertain such a hope!"

"Not so foolish as you conceive, Octavia," answered Pauline, in a tone of partial triumph. "A secret of the utmost importance is in my keeping—a secret which only became known to me on Sunday last, while I was out with Gabriel during your absence at church——"

"And that secret?" exclaimed Octavia, anxiously.

"Involves the honour of a lady of the highest rank——"

"But it will not save *my* honour, Pauline," interrupted the elder sister, bitterly. "Oh! what in the name of heaven has all this to do with my unhappy case?" she demanded, gazing in astonishment upon Pauline. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the lady who became a mother at our recent abode, under such mysterious circumstances——"

"Mrs. Mordaunt?" cried Octavia, literally trembling with impatience.

"Yes — Mrs. Mordaunt," repeated Pauline. "And can you guess who this Mrs. Mordaunt really is?"

"How can I, Pauline?" exclaimed the elder sister. "But you remember that we always suspected her to be some lady of rank—and her friend Mrs. Smith too——"

"Nor were we wrong in our conjectures, Octavia," proceeded the younger Miss Clarendon, solemnly: "for—as sure as I am now addressing my words to you—that Mrs. Smith was the high-born, wealthy, and fashionable Countess of Desborough — and Mrs. Mordaunt was her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia!"

"Great heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Octavia, almost forgetting her own afflictions in the absorbing interest of this tremendous revelation.

"It is not only possible—it is the truth," said Pauline. "I have been introduced to her Royal Highness—and there is no doubt of her identity with our Mrs. Mordaunt. Besides," continued Pauline, "when in conversation with the Prince of Wales relative to yourself, I was anxious to ascertain whether *he* was acquainted with his sister's frailty—for at the moment I was breathing vague threats into his ear: and the few words which I let drop produced an effect upon him as if a vertigo had suddenly seized on his brain. Then—later in the evening—he asked me, in a tone full of deep meaning, whether Lord Florimel was acquainted with the Princess Sophia's adventure in the Edgeware Road ——"

"Yes—yes—I recollect well!" exclaimed Octavia, a sudden reminiscence flashing in upon her brain: "it was from my lips that the Prince of Wales learnt the dishonour of his own sister! He questioned me so closely—he forced me to reveal all that had occurred at the villa in connexion with the supposed Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith—and now I remember that there was something strange and unaccountable in his manner at the time!"

"Oh! was it not a species of retribution that he should thus have received the intelligence of his sister's shame from the lips of one whom he himself had dishonoured?" whispered Pauline, in a low and solemn tone. "But you now perceive, my beloved sister, how it is possible that this haughty Prince can be made to fall on his knees before you and consent to any sacrifice which you may dictate as the price of secrecy respecting the Princess?"

"My God! I dare not employ menaces, Pauline!" exclaimed Octavia, wringing her hands hysterically. "I have loved him too well—still love him too tenderly——And yet," she cried, suddenly interrupting herself,—"why should I spare him, since he hesitates not to break my heart?—why should I release him from his vows if it be indeed within my power to enforce their fulfilment?"

"It is a matter of such vital importance, Octavia," said Pauline, "that you must deliberate on it with far more composure and tranquillity than you can now bring to bear upon the question. Let us cease to speak thereon for the present—and, in the name of everything sacred! study to exercise a control over your feelings."

"I may say that the bitterness of death is past," observed poor Octavia, with difficulty subduing a profound sob. "The worst is now known—the most terrible paroxysm of grief is over — and I must endeavour——"

And scarcely had she time to wipe away the traces of her tears and smooth her charming auburn hair, when the door opened and the Hon. Arthur Eaton made his appearance.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE PROPOSAL.

"My sweet cousins," exclaimed the young gentleman, observing that they both started and even exhibited signs of confusion and embarrassment,—"if I interrupt you in any very serious discourse, I will at once retire. But really," he added, smiling, "I am at a loss to conceive what you can have to render you both so demure——"

"Nay—come in, Arthur," said Pauline. "You surely are not upon such ceremonial terms with us as to remain standing on the threshold until we invite you to enter."

"On the contrary, my dear cousin," returned Mr. Eaton, "I consider myself on so intimate and friendly a footing in this house, that I at once and unhesitatingly avow my desire to have a few minutes' conversation with your sister in private."

"With me!" ejaculated the elder Miss Clarendon, in amazement.

"Assuredly," answered the young gentleman, with a smile: "since Pauline has no other sister, I must of course mean you."

"And what can you possibly have to say to me in private, Arthur?" exclaimed Octavia, her colour coming and going in rapid alternations, as a thousand conflicting thoughts and fears swept through her mind.

"Nothing very formidable," was the response. "Now, my dear Pauline, I am certain you will gratify my request by leaving me *tête-a-tête* with your sister."

"Oh! certainly—since you are really serious—which I did not think you were at first," exclaimed Pauline: and, darting a look full of kind encouragement upon her sister, she hurried from the room.

"In the name of heaven! what means all this mystery, Arthur?" demanded Octavia, the moment the door closed behind Pauline.

"You are agitated—trembling from head to foot—apparently overwhelmed with some secret grief, Octavia!" exclaimed the young gentleman, heedless of her question—for he was suddenly struck by her excited manner, her changing cheeks, her rapid utterance, and her wild looks. "Tell me—has anything occurred to vex or annoy you?—for you surely can make a confidant of one who feels so deep an interest in your welfare as I."

"No—no—I am not agitated now," said Octavia, exerting all her power and all her strength to regain her self-possession. "I was only startled by the suddenness with which you demanded a private interview—I was fearful that something had happened—to my father perhaps——But I am composed and tranquil now, Arthur," she added, smiling faintly.

"I am afraid that you are only assuming a tranquillity which you do not in reality experience

Octavia," said the young gentleman, in a tone of deep and touching kindness. "However, I will not seek to penetrate into your feelings: perhaps the communication which I am about to make will induce you of your own accord to treat me with full confidence. Come—let us sit down, Octavia, and have five minutes' serious conversation together."

Thus speaking, he conducted her to the sofa: then taking a chair near her, he gazed upon her attentively for a few moments.

"To what is all this to lead?" demanded Octavia, experiencing a vague and unknown terror, and little divining the turn which the conversation was so speedily to take: but she felt, whilst she cast down her blushing face beneath the steadfast yet kind looks of her youthful relative, as if he were acquainted with her secret and was about to proclaim to her ears his knowledge of her amour, her dishonour, and her affliction.

"You ask to what all this is to lead, Octavia," said Arthur, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "as if my visit were an intrusion—as if my presence were unwelcome. Did I indeed interpret your words and manner in a sense so unaccountable on your part and so little flattering to myself, a seal would at once be placed upon my lips in respect to the communication which I am here to make."

"Pardon—forgive me, Arthur," exclaimed Miss Clarendon, extending her hand towards him: "I have been rude—unkind—eccentric——"

"Say no more upon the subject, Octavia," interrupted Arthur, pressing her fair hand for a moment, and then gently dropping it. "And now listen to me attentively, my fair cousin."

Octavia gazed upon him with more of curiosity and less of terror in her looks: for his words, tone, and manner were kind and reassuring in the extreme.

"You are well aware, my dear cousin," resumed Arthur, "that an unfortunate estrangement existed until lately between your branch of the family and mine. This breach—which, thank God! had nothing to do with either you or me—is now healed between our parents; and the two branches have become as it were one family. To speak, however, in a worldly sense,—and I cannot very well avoid touching upon the point, delicate though it be,—your father would naturally be pleased to behold *his* branch of the family sharing in the honours and enjoying the fortune of the race with which he is connected. Moreover, I have reflected, my dear cousin, that an atonement is due from the branch to which I belong unto yours: and duty—inclination—propriety—and justice have prompted me to take the step which I am about to explain to you."

He paused for a few moments and fixed his eyes upon Octavia's countenance to ascertain if she had begun to comprehend his meaning: but so troubled did her brain still feel, after that long and terrible conversation with Pauline, that it was unable to exercise the keenness of perception and the readiness of conjecture which it would have called into play under other circumstances. Thus, bewildered by the prefatory observations which had just been addressed to her, the young lady returned the earnest looks of the Hon. Arthur Eaton with a vacant gaze of surprise, uncertainty, and suspense.

"You do not understand me, Octavia," he said, with a smile; "and I see that I must be more explicit. In a word, I have received from your father not only the assurance that your affections are disengaged—but likewise his permission to offer you my hand."

"Arthur—you—you—know not what you say—what you do!" murmured Miss Clarendon, suddenly thrown completely off her guard by a communication which so vividly and painfully recalled to her memory the love which she cherished for the ingrate Prince: then, darting upon him a look of ineffable anguish, she covered her face with her hands, and, bursting into tears, gave free issue to the pent-up grief which had been swelling for the last few minutes in her bosom.

"My God! Octavia, what ails you?—what is the matter?" inquired Arthur, amazed as well as painfully afflicted by this unaccountable and heart-rending behaviour of the young lady. "If I have said aught to offend you, Octavia, I implore your forgiveness. I sought to render you happy—and not bring tears from your eyes. But perhaps you love another—and your affection is a secret? Oh! cherish that love, then, Octavia—and think not for a single moment that I would seek to wean you away from the object of such an attachment."

"Spare me, Arthur—spare me!" murmured Miss Clarendon, her whole frame convulsing with an inexpressible grief. "Talk not to me of love——"

"Only one word more, Octavia," interrupted Arthur: "and *that* I must say—for my own sake—for yours also! Learn, then, that much as I esteem you—deeply as I am interested in your welfare—I do not love you otherwise than as a relative, or as a friend loves a very dear friend. It was not, then, through the heart's tender affection that I demanded your hand—but purely from a sense of duty. My reasons for believing that there *was* a duty involved in this step I have already explained to you; and you can now comprehend my motives——"

"Oh! yes—I perceive that you are the most generous of men!" exclaimed Octavia, all the nobleness of her cousin's intentions and views now bursting upon her mind as a flood of light streams suddenly into a dark cave illuminating all its recesses. "You would have become my husband in order to make me the sharer of your rank and fortune—so that when Lord Marchmont should be summoned to the tomb, my father might be consoled for the loss of a coronet by beholding it upon the brow of his daughter! Yes—yes—Arthur Eaton—I comprehend it all now; and again I thank you—Oh! how cordially I thank you for this unparalleled generosity. But it may not be, Arthur," she added, her voice suddenly dropping, and her look bending downward at the same time—whilst a deep crimson glow suffused itself over her countenance, and her neck, even unto her bosom.

"You love another, then?" said the young man: and, without waiting for a reply, he exclaimed, "God grant that you may be happy, Octavia!"

"Happy!" she repeated, with a sudden start: then, instantly composing herself, she said in a tone of deep and indescribable feeling, "I thank God, Arthur, that you do *not* love me: for had I an enemy deserving of my bitterest rancour, I would not wish that he should know what a hopeless attachment is."

"Ah!" ejaculated Eaton: "is it possible, my poor cousin, that your heart cherishes such a blighting love as this?"

"What have I said? what have I told you?" ex-

claimed Octavia, now perceiving that she had been hurried by her emotions to the vicinage of dangerous ground. "Do not question me any farther—do not persist in continuing the discourse upon this topic. I thank you, Arthur—most sincerely thank you—for the honour you have done me and the generosity which you have displayed towards my father and myself: but I beseech you not to press me for any additional explanation respecting the motive which compels me to decline your flattering proposal."

"Not for worlds, Octavia," exclaimed the young man, "would I say or do aught to give you pain. But—ere we take leave of this topic altogether—permit me to make one observation, which I hope you will treasure up in your memory."

"Speak, Arthur," said Miss Clarendon, growing more composed.

"It is that should you ever be placed in a position to require a friend, Octavia—a sincere friend," repeated the Hon. Arthur Eaton,—"a friend in whom you might wish to put even more trust than in a brother,—hesitate not to send for me—and my actions shall prove the sincerity with which I am now uttering these words."

"Oh! the time may indeed come when I shall require a friend such as you," murmured Octavia, taking the young gentleman's hand and pressing it with all the cordial fervour of an intense gratitude. "Be assured I will not hesitate to address myself to you, Arthur, in such a case. But even now—at once—this moment," she exclaimed, a sudden thought striking her,—"I am about to demand a favour at your hands."

"You have only to name it, Octavia," said Arthur, who, perceiving that the beauteous creature was unhappy, experienced a profound compassion and a sincere sympathy in her behalf. "In what manner can I prove my friendship to you, dear cousin?" he inquired, seeing that she hesitated.

"I have confessed to you that I love another," she responded at length, whilst casting down her looks and blushing deeply: "but I do not wish that my father should learn this secret."

"Not from my lips shall Mr. Clarendon receive the slightest hint of the real motive which has led you to reject my proposal," returned Arthur, emphatically. "I will seek him at once—I will tell him that you and I have had a long and serious conversation together—and that we have mutually arrived at the conclusion that our happiness would not be ensured by any closer alliance than that of friendship."

"I thank you sincerely, my dear cousin," said the young lady, "for this fresh proof of your goodness and generosity towards me."

Arthur Eaton then took his leave of Octavia and returned to the library where Mr. Clarendon was building fine castles in the air on the strength of the belief which he entertained that his daughter would cheerfully accept her cousin's proposal.

"Well, my dear Arthur," he exclaimed, the moment the young gentleman re-appeared in his presence; "I suppose that nothing remains but to fix the day ——"

"Indeed, my dear sir," interrupted Eaton, assuming a serious air,—"naught is settled—nor is there aught now to settle."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Clarendon, in amazement.

"I mean that Miss Octavia and myself have had a long and solemn discourse together," answered the Hon. Mr. Eaton,—"and that we have decided upon remaining excellent friends——"

"She has refused you, Arthur!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his lips growing cold and quivering with rage.

"Not so, my dear sir," returned the young gentleman: "or rather, we have refused each other. But, if there be any preponderating fault on one side, it is upon mine—and you must not therefore blame your daughter."

Having thus spoken, Arthur Eaton took his leave of Mr. Clarendon, who was scarcely able to conceal his vexation and disappointment until the door closed behind the young gentleman: and then, throwing himself back in his seat, he clutched the hair on each side of his head, muttering savagely between his teeth, "Miserable wretch that I am! was I not born to experience an incessant series of misfortunes?"

But suddenly the image of the veiled lady sprang up in his mind: and, recovering his composure, he began to reflect profoundly once more upon all she had that morning said to him.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND HIS FRIEND.

WHILE these scenes were taking place at Mr. Clarendon's abode in Cavendish Square, his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales awoke with a bad headache and in an execrable humour in his sumptuous bed-chamber at Carlton House.

We have already described this apartment in the sixteenth chapter of our narrative, to which the reader may refer if he be in any way anxious to refresh his memory concerning the luxurious manner of its fittings and appointments.

Raising himself painfully in his couch, and giving vent to a bitter imprecation against the aching pangs which racked his head, the Prince sought relief in the cooling beverages afforded him by the table at his bed-side; and when the draught of hock and soda-water had gone hissing down his parched throat, he threw himself back to enjoy the refreshing sensations which followed.

But though the pain in the head soon underwent a partial mitigation, the train of thoughts which gradually passed through the mind of the heir-apparent was of no pleasurable description.

Pauline had discovered his princely rank, and would of course communicate the circumstance to her sister. How Octavia would receive the terrible revelation,—whether she would be overwhelmed with grief or goaded to vengeance,—it was impossible to say. But certain it was that the secret of the Princess Sophia's frailty was in the keeping of those two young ladies; and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales shuddered when he thought what use they might make of their knowledge of his sister's shame.

Even if he had nothing more than all this to vex him, it was quite enough. But there were other circumstances which forced themselves on his contemplation, in spite of his habitual anxiety to shut his mental eyes against all unpleasant objects.

In the first place, he had not only signally failed in his stratagem with regard to the Countess of Desborough; but the incidents of the preceding evening

had made her acquainted with a secret which so completely put him in her power that he would never again dare to spread the meshes of his intrigues at her feet. For she had learnt that Mrs. Fitzherbert was his own wedded wife; and that fact, breathed to the public, would endanger his accession to the throne, inasmuch as the lady whom he had thus espoused, in spite of the Royal Marriage Act, was a Roman Catholic!

Secondly, his Royal Highness had no doubt provoked the bitter indignation of Mrs. Fitzherbert by his conduct towards Lady Desborough; and he not only dreaded "a scene" with his morganatic wife the next time he repaired into her presence, but he likewise trembled lest she should take it into her head to demand a full and complete recognition before the world, in order to escape in future the possibility of receiving such injurious imputations as Eleanor had in the first instance uttered against her during the memorable affair of the preceding evening.

All these matters were terribly perplexing to a Prince who hated even the trouble of thinking on anything save pleasure and enjoyment, and who was but little fitted by a life of sensuality and indulgence to grapple with a host of embarrassing circumstances. In fact, he could not bear to think for himself: and, knowing moreover that certain affairs had reached a crisis in which some resolute and definite step must be taken, he resolved to summon his universal friend to counsel and assist him.

Ringing the bell by means of the silken cord hanging between the curtains and the wall, he waited impatiently until the French valet, dressed with such nice precision in plain black, responded to the summons.

"Germain," said his Royal Highness, "send up immediately to Mr. Meagles' lodgings with a request that he will come to me as soon as possible."

The valet bowed and retired; and the Prince—fancying, with his natural indolence, that half of the necessary remedial measures were already accomplished in the mere fact of sending for the individual to whom their execution was to be entrusted—turned round and fell into a doze.

Then that high and mighty personage—the envied of all men,—the adored by all women,—the heir-apparent to the throne of England—snored as loudly, as coarsely, and as discordantly as any peasant: and moreover, this elegant and accomplished individual—this most polished gentleman in Europe—had gone to bed at two in the morning in the most beastly, helpless, and swinish state of intoxication!

O Royalty! how despicable wast thou then!

Well, George Prince of Wales enjoyed a comfortable snooze for nearly an hour, at the expiration of which time Mr. Meagles made his appearance; and his Royal Highness woke up.

"My dear Tim," he said, stretching forth his hand to grasp that of his friend,—"come and sit down by the bed-side: for I am anxious to have a very serious conversation with you. Indeed, I have sundry revelations to make to you—and divers commissions wherewith to entrust you."

"I am at your service, Prince," answered Meagles, taking a chair: then, lolling back in the seat and caressing his well-curled auburn whiskers, he said, "Between you and me, my illustrious friend, you look just for all the world as if you had been infernally drunk last night. And yet that could scarcely have been the case, seeing that you gave a grand ball."

"By Jove! but it was the case though, my dear fellow!" exclaimed the Prince. "I was what may be called royally drunk—and what is worse still, I got drunk by myself, through sheer vexation and annoyance."

"The devil you did!" cried Meagles. "Let us hear how that happened."

"Yes—I must touch slightly upon it," said the Prince, in a musing tone: "because it has reference to the matters on which I am anxious to consult you. Well, you must know that at the early part of the evening Mrs. Fitzherbert took umbrage at something and left the ball-rooms. I sent after her to her own apartments—but she was nowhere to be found. However, it seems that she had retired to a spare bed-chamber not very far from the saloons; inasmuch as she suddenly made her appearance from behind the curtains in that chamber, when I and a lady who had been enticed thither by a well-contrived stratagem, were in the midst of a somewhat heated conversation together."

"What the deuce! did you meet the lady in the very same room to which Mrs. Fitzherbert had previously retired?" asked Meagles, to whom the explanation was not very clear.

"Just so," answered his Royal Highness. "And now, my good friend," continued the heir-apparent, with some little degree of hesitation and embarrassment, "I am about to reveal to you precisely the same secret which Mrs. Fitzherbert in her rage proclaimed to the astonished ears of the lady in question. But this secret, my dear Tim," added the Prince, emphatically, "is safe with the lady—for she is a woman of honour—and it must be safe with *you* also."

"Fear nothing, Prince," exclaimed Meagles. "You know well enough that I am not likely to betray any confidence which you place in me."

"Oh! I'm perfectly assured of *that*, Tim!" cried the Prince: then, sinking his voice to a low and solemn whisper, he said, "The secret which Mrs. Fitzherbert proclaimed last night and which I now reveal to you, is that we are married——"

"Married!" ejaculated Meagles, with well affected astonishment; for he was already aware of the fact which the Prince of Wales was now confessing to him.

"Hush!" said the heir-apparent: "such a secret ought scarcely to be breathed to the air! Yes—it is true, Tim, that in a moment of weakness—folly—madness—I know not what to call it—I accompanied Mrs. Fitzherbert to the altar. Dazzled by her beauty—burning to possess her—excited almost to a delirium by the winning arts and seductive wiles which she practised to ensnare me,—I took that fatal step, believing it to be the only means of obtaining admission to her bed. However, the mischief is done and cannot be undone: but you can well understand that it has placed me in a cruel dilemma, now that the King and the Ministers have determined to marry me to the German Princess."

"And in what manner can I assist you?" demanded Meagles, inwardly delighted to perceive that matters were now coming to a crisis in which his aid must inevitably be sought and full confidence reposed in him accordingly.

"I have been thinking seriously over my position," resumed the Prince; "and the only avenue of escape which I can discover out of a complete morass of difficulties is to assent to this marriage with Caroline

of Brunswick. Steeped to my very eyes in debts—pestered by creditors whose dunning amounts to intolerable insolence—in constant danger of having my very carriage and horses seized by a rascally sheriff's-officer every time I go out,—what course am I to adopt? I might bully my father in some respects—but I cannot bully the Ministers; and you know that Pitt and his party hate me as they do the very devil."

"Well, then—from all this I am to understand that your Royal Highness will marry the Princess Caroline of Brunswick?" said Meagles, interrogatively.

"Yes—provided I can in any way induce or compel Mrs. Fitzherbert to consent thereto," replied the Prince.

"By fair means I should think that you will never succeed," observed Meagles, drily.

"That is precisely the apprehension which I entertain," exclaimed the heir-apparent: then, after a brief pause, and in an embarrassed tone, he added, "And as to foul means—I know not what kind to adopt."

"But you *would* adopt them, if any were to be suggested?" said Meagles, in a quiet way.

"My position is so awkward—so embarrassing—so intolerable, Tim," answered the heir-apparent, in a subdued voice and with a significant look, "that I would do anything—yes, *anything*," he repeated, with marked emphasis, "to ameliorate it. In a word, if Mrs. Fitzherbert will not consent to this marriage which the King and Ministers have chalked out for me, I am a thoroughly lost, ruined, and degraded man."

"You would therefore bestow an immense reward upon any one who should,—either by fair means or by foul,—induce or compel Mrs. Fitzherbert to yield that consent and agree to any rational arrangement which you may be enabled to make with regard to herself? I should observe," added Meagles, "that you would undertake to grant such reward on your accession to the throne?"

"By heaven, I should only be too happy!" exclaimed the Prince. "But is it possible, Tim, that you have any plan in your head—any scheme——"

"Well, I can't exactly say at present," interrupted Meagles. "I may however think of a project——"

"Ah! I knew you would give me some hope in this respect!" cried the Prince, chuckling at the idea of getting rid of Mrs. Fitzherbert: for remorse or compunction seldom if ever stayed the progress of this bad man's execrable selfishness. "What is your plan, Tim?" he demanded impatiently: "what do you suggest?"

"Leave me a little time to consider," responded Meagles, who did not choose to avow at once that he possessed the means of coercing Mrs. Fitzherbert at will. "Have you any other matters to communicate to me?—because you may just as well make a clean breast of all your difficulties and embarrassments while you are about it—and then I may be enabled to judge of the best measures to put you clear, right, and straight again."

"Well, I have something else to communicate," said the Prince. "The truth is I have seduced a young lady——"

"The seduction of a young lady is the heading which must appear to many a chapter in your life, my dear Prince," interrupted Meagles. "But go on. You have seduced a young lady—and you are afraid of a row?"

"Precisely so," answered the heir-apparent. "The fair one is a certain Miss Clarendon—Octavia Clarendon——"

"Daughter of a gentleman who is in some way connected with Lord Marchmont?" said Meagles, inquiringly.

"The same," replied his Royal Highness. "Do you know him?"

"Only by name," was the response. "But is the affair difficult to manage?"

"You perceive, Tim, that the young lady belongs to a highly respectable family——"

"To an aristocratic family," interrupted Meagles; "and therefore, unless she be very proud of having been seduced by you—and unless her father and relations are also very proud that she should have become a Prince's mistress—this affair presents to our view a phase of no ordinary colour. For I am very certain that out of every hundred aristocratic families, ninety-nine would be charmed and delighted to see a wife, a sister, or a daughter publicly pointed out as the mistress of your Royal Highness."

"Such is no doubt the fact," observed George: "for the aristocracy, so haughty and overbearing to the middle and lower classes, is nauseatingly servile and cringing to Royalty. However, we will not waste time in discussing this point. Suffice it for our present purpose that Mr. Clarendon is a man who must be appeased for the dishonour of his daughter."

"Is he acquainted with the little circumstance?" inquired Tim.

"Not yet—at least I hope not. But there is no time to lose, my dear friend——"

"What do you wish to have done?" demanded Meagles.

"A peerage must be obtained for Mr. Clarendon!" was the emphatic response.

"The devil!" ejaculated Tim: "peerages are not picked up in the street — and I don't think that you could very well humble yourself so far to Pitt as to ask him for one."

"No—I would see the Prime Minister dead and damned first," answered the Prince. "It is of my father that the peerage must be demanded—and it is you who will undertake the mission on my behalf."

"Would you have me go to Windsor to wait upon his Majesty on such a business?" demanded Meagles, surveying the Prince with the most unfeigned astonishment.

"To be sure I would!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "Surely you have the courage, Tim?"

"I have the courage to face the very devil himself," responded Meagles; "and that is more than enough to enable me to look the King in the countenance. But are you serious?"

"Never more so. You know that half of the Lightfoot certificate which I have in my possession?"

"To be sure I do," said Meagles, throwing off with an effort a sensation of uneasiness which suddenly began to creep over him at the mention of that fragment of the document: for the reader will remember that for some weeks past it had been in the possession of Tim himself, who found it amongst the roll of papers which he purloined from the

desk on that morning when the heir-apparent amused himself with the Amazon in the bath.

"Well, Tim," continued the Prince of Wales, "you must take that fragment of the certificate with you—and my illustrious father will be very glad to give you in exchange an undertaking that the necessary patents shall be drawn up without delay in order to confer the peerage on Mr. Clarendon. Come, Tim—you shall be off to Windsor this very day—for we may as well set briskly and earnestly to work with a view to have these little matters settled as soon as possible. Give me my desk, Tim—and I will at once put you in possession of the half of the certificate which is to act like a spell upon my father."

Putting a good face upon the matter, and with as much alacrity as if he knew that the document now required was really in the place where the Prince had deposited it, Tim Meagles proceeded to convey the handsome writing-desk from the chiffonier on which it stood to the table by the side of the sumptuous couch. His Royal Highness then drew the long gold chain from beneath his pillow; and with the key suspended thereto he opened the desk.

Plunging his hand amidst the papers which filled one of the compartments, the heir-apparent sought for the particular packet which he required; and when he could not immediately find it, he instituted a more careful and less hurried examination into the contents of that division of his desk. But, the packet still continuing invisible, he rapped out sundry impatient oaths: while a cloud gathered rapidly upon his brow.

"By heaven! I have lost the papers—the very important papers which I am seeking," he observed, in a tone of bitter vexation. "I am sure that I put them away here——"

"You might have locked them up in some other place," suggested Meagles, as if quite innocent of any sinister knowledge concerning them.

"No—I am sure they were *here!*" exclaimed the Prince. "Perdition! some one has been to my desk," he added, his entire countenance contracting with the rage and alarm that gathered rapidly in his breast.

"Have you lost any papers besides the half of the certificate?" demanded Meagles.

"Yes—several," responded the heir-apparent, clenching his fists with impotent fury: "papers of the utmost consequence—proving this very marriage between myself and Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"That is awkward—very awkward," observed Meagles, shaking his head in a serious manner.

"Awkward!—'tis positively ruinous," exclaimed the Prince. "What shall I do?—whom can I suspect? The only person at all likely to visit my desk would be Mrs. Fitzherbert herself——"

"Depend upon it, she is the authoress of this circumstance," interrupted Tim; "and if I were you, I would not annoy myself with unpleasant speculations and conjectures. Besides, if any other person should have got hold of those papers, it can only be for the purpose of selling them back again to you——"

"True!" ejaculated the Prince. "But what are we to do now without the fragment of the certificate in Hannah Lightfoot's affair?"

"Have the goodness to listen to me for a few minutes, Prince," said Meagles: "and I dare swear we shall come to a right understanding. You know that I am a man of rather ready wit, and that I don't take a year to decide what ought to be done when the emergency is so pressing as scarcely to leave a minute for reflection. Well—I have hit upon two schemes——"

"Two schemes?" exclaimed the Prince, inquiringly.

"Yes—two schemes," repeated Meagles: "for are there not two separate affairs to settle? One is to induce Mrs. Fitzherbert to consent to separate from you—to renounce all pretentions to be considered your wife—and to agree to such terms for her future maintenance as you may be enabled to propose. This, I say, is one object to gain—and I am the man to accomplish it!"

"You" cried the Prince, with mingled amazement and pleasure. "But Mrs. Fitzherbert does not——"

And he stopped short suddenly.

"Does not like me much better than the devil does holy water, eh?" exclaimed Meagles. "*That* is what your Royal Highness would have said: and why not finish your sentence? It is useless to stand on ceremony with me. However, I tell you over again that I will undertake to induce the lady, whether she likes me or not, to assent to all the conditions I have named: but I must stipulate that you do not ask me to explain the means which I shall adopt for this purpose."

"Damn the means, Tim," exclaimed the Prince, in a hilarious tone, "provided the aim be accomplished. You have my free permission," continued this execrably selfish and diabolically heartless individual,—"to use any spells—charms—incantations—or enchantments you choose,—in plain terms, to adopt any means you may think advisable,—so long as the grand result be gained."

"Good!" observed Meagles, scarcely able however to conceal his disgust at the cowardly, unmanly, demoniac treachery which that infamous Prince was capable of practising towards a woman who really loved him. "You may consider the affair relative to Mrs. Fitzherbert as being just the same as if it were settled. On my return from Windsor I will direct my immediate attention thereto."

"Your return from Windsor!" repeated the Prince: "but how can you go thither at all without the document?"

"I have a scheme in my head to meet *that* emergency also," replied Meagles. "Come—don't ask me any questions—and don't make yourself unhappy: *both* matters shall be settled, I can promise you. Mrs. Fitzherbert shall agree to your terms on the one hand—and your illustrious father shall grant Mr. Clarendon a peerage, on the other hand."

"Is it possible, Tim!" exclaimed the delighted heir-apparent. "You are the cleverest fellow in the universe, by God! But how can I reward you for all this?"

"When I have fulfilled what I have promised, it will be time to talk of recompense," said Meagles. "No cure, no pay: but if there be a cure in this instance, I warn you, my dear Prince, that I shall ask something handsome as my reward, to be granted whenever the means are in your power."

"You cannot ask too much, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness, who was always ready to

promise most lavishly at the very moment he was least able to perform.

"Well—well," said Meagles, in a tone of apparent indifference; "we will talk about *that* another time. I am now off to Windsor."

Thus speaking, he shook hands with the Prince and took his departure.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE NEW LIGHT TRACT DISTRIBUTION SOCIETY.

We must now inform our readers that when the message which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales sent up to Jermyn Street, requesting the immediate attendance of Mr. Meagles at Carlton House, was delivered to that gentleman, he was sitting at a late breakfast in company with his bosom friend the Amazon.

This beautiful, eccentric, and profligate woman was clad in her male garb, as usual; and the early scamper which she had taken on horseback, left upon her cheeks so ruddy a glow and so rich a bloom of health as to give her the appearance of all the virgin freshness of that youthfulness the plump charms and firm contours of which she had so well preserved.

At the moment when the message from the Prince of Wales was delivered in Jermyn Street, Tim Meagles and his lovely companion were enjoying a hearty laugh in anticipation of some capital fun which they had promised themselves that noon: for the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby had presented them with platform tickets for a grand meeting of the New Light Tract Distribution Society, which was to be holden at mid-day precise in a large hall somewhere in the Strand.

But the message from the Prince suddenly appeared to put an end to this project, until Meagles suggested that Lady Lade should divert herself by repairing to the meeting where he might join her the moment he had ascertained what his Royal Highness wanted with him.

This arrangement being accordingly settled, Meagles ordered his gig—drove the Amazon to the place of assembly—escorted her to a seat upon the platform—and then, taking a temporary leave of her, hastened to Carlton House, where he had that interview with the Prince which has been recorded in the preceding chapter.

The body of the hall was crowded to excess. Sanctimonious-looking gentlemen of middle age, pious elderly ladies, and demure old maids, were the principal specimens of animated nature: a great number of bald heads and white neckcloths were visible;—and, amongst the various odours which saluted the olfactory nerves, that of brandy decidedly prevailed over the eau-de-cologne, lavender-water, musk, and perspiration.

The platform was very well filled, but not inconveniently crowded; and its occupants were chiefly of the female sex, consisting of the wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, and daughters of the reverend gentlemen connected with the New Light Tract Distribution Society.

When the Amazon made her appearance, in her jaunty attire and with her riding whip in her hand, those pious ladies elevated their eyes and their hands in an awful manner—while a subdued groan, as if of concentrated bitterness, passed through the assemblage: but smoothing her shining tresses, and stepping over the benches with her admirably symmetrical limbs, Lady Letitia wore a bland and affable expression of countenance as she proceeded to settle herself in a nook where she could hear and see all that was going on, but where she might to some extent escape a degree of observation which it was desirable to avoid even by one of her masculine character and bold disposition.

Scarcely had she thus taken a seat which suited her, when the organ began to play: but as the organist, who was of course a member of the Society, had been up all night at a "free-and-easy" and was now considerably disguised in liquor, he was not over particular as to the accuracy of the harmony which he thus sent forth to the audience. This little circumstance was not however noticed by the great majority of the assembly; and as for the tipsiness of the individual himself, *that* is a little secret which was not even suspected, but which we have ventured to record for the behoof of our two hundred thousand readers.

The organ had been playing for about five minutes, when a small low door opened at the back of the platform; and thence came forth six or seven demure, sanctimonious, and mournful-looking gentlemen, amongst whom were the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

A tremendous clapping of the hands and stamping of the feet instantly commenced throughout the hall: the organ ceased—and when the applause had finished also, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax vociferated at the top of his voice, "Christian friends, I beg to move that Brother Sneaksby do take the chair!"

The motion, being seconded, was duly carried—and the reverend gentleman took his seat in the presidential chair with as awful a ceremony and as miserable an expression of countenance as if it were the rack or some other frightful engine of torture. For be it remembered that the "saints" always look as wretched and unhappy as possible—just for all the world as if it were a sin to be cheerful, merry, and contented.

Renewed applause accompanied the taking of the chair; and when the clapping of hands and stamping of feet had again subsided, the secretary, who delighted in the euphonious name of Gotobed Tumpkins, gave out a hymn.

Then the whole audience, alike in the body of the hall and on the platform, rose up—the organ pealed forth the wrong tune—and a thousand voices combined their nasal twangings in such harmony that would have driven Saint Cecilia crazy had she been alive and present to hear it.

The hymn, which by the bye was of the Secretary's own composing, having been brought to a conclusion,—not, however, without some danger of cracking the Amazon's ears, unaccustomed as she was to such peculiar melody,—the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby rose and addressed the meeting at great length.

He said that this was the second anniversary of the New Light Tract Distribution Society, and that he was overpowered with feelings of holy ecstacy on finding that such a numerous, respectable, and godly assemblage had met to celebrate the occasion. The Secretary would presently read his Report, from which interesting document it would appear that several lost sheep had been redeemed from the darkness in which they had long been floundering, and were now amongst the most savoury vessels of the Lord.

(*Loud cheers.*) But it must not be forgotten that there were still thousands (*groans*),—he might say hundreds of thousands (*deep groans*),—nay, millions (*hollow groans*),—yes, millions of benighted beings whose redemption it was most desirable to work out. (*Hear, hear.*) But how was such redemption to be effected? Mainly by the aid of that Society, whose Tracts could be insinuated into families whither the missionaries of the New Lights could not themselves obtain access. Would that meeting, then, support the Society? (*Cheers.*) Ah! it was all very well to cheer and applaud: but would those pious, holy, and godly persons whom he (Mr. Sneaksby) was addressing,—would they, he wished to know, put their hands into their pockets? (*Cheers.*) And if they put their hands into their pockets, would they pull them out again with something in them? (*Loud cries of "We will! we will!"*) This was an enthusiasm which he (Mr. Sneaksby) was delighted to behold, and which he fully and completely shared; and he begged to observe that all subscriptions made that day to the funds of the Society would be advertised in the leading newspapers, with the names and addresses of the donors in full. (*Tremendous applause.*) Mr. Sneaksby then delivered a long and eloquent harangue, in which he proved to the satisfaction of all present, the Amazon alone excepted, that heaven was intended exclusively for the New Lights, and that the members of all other sects, creeds, and religious denominations were as assuredly booked for the lower regions as he (Mr. Sneaksby) was there to proclaim the fact.

The reverend gentleman sate down amidst tremendous cheering, which was prolonged for some minutes,—during which the elderly ladies had recourse to their brandy-flasks, whereby they seemed considerably refreshed.

Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, the Secretary, then rose to read the Report; and, as he had the misfortune to have a crooked leg, he walked with a peculiarly

comical up-and-down motion from his seat to the front of the platform. His presence nevertheless elicited immense applause, which he acknowledged with sundry low bows addressed to all quarters of the assembly.

The Report set forth that during the year ending on that day the Society had enjoyed an increased amount of divine grace, the income being 300*l.* more than that of the previous year. (*Cheers.*) During the last twelve months the receipts had amounted to 7,567*l.* 3*s.* 2½*d.*; and the expenditure to 7,567*l.* 3*s.* 2*d.* Balance in the Treasurer's hand, one halfpenny. (*Cheers.*) The salaries of Directors, Managers, Secretary, Auditors, Treasurer, and Clerk, amounted to 6,000*l.*: Rent of Offices, Stationery, and Extras, 500*l.*; Law Expenses, 500*l.* There then remained the handsome sum of 567*l.* 3*s.* 2*d.* to expend in the distribution of Tracts; and he (Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins) could congratulate the members of the Society upon having a balance in hand. It was true that this balance was not considerable—indeed it was only one halfpenny; still it was a balance—and he would defy their enemies to accuse them of being in debt. (*Loud cheers.*)

When the applause had subsided, a stout consequential-looking little man rose up in the midst of the assembly, and desired to know how law expenses to the amount of 500*l.* had been incurred. Mr. Sneaksby, as chairman, desired him not to interrupt the proceedings; but the little gentleman grew excited, and insisted on having an answer—alleging that he was a subscriber of 5*l.* a-year to the Society and had a right to know how the money was expended.

The Secretary, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, thereupon explained that an action had been brought against that holy and pious vessel, the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, for the seduction of a small tradesman's wife; that the Committee of the Society, well convinced of their excellent pastor's innocence, made the cause their own and employed the Society's solicitor to manage the defence; that, when the case was tried, the Judge and Jury were evidently leagued together to oppress the guiltless Mr. Sneaksby; that a verdict was accordingly given against him; and that the Society had to pay the damages and costs in order to save the reverend gentleman from a prison. (*Groans.*) But Mr. Sneaksby was there—in the presence of his friends; and he (Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins) would ask whether he (the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby) looked like a guilty man or not.

"Innocent! innocent!" ejaculated innumerable voices: while the object of this sympathy pursed up his mouth in so extraordinary a fashion that he certainly bore at the moment a greater resemblance to a humbug than a saint.

"I protest against adopting the Report with that item of 500*l.* for law expenses," exclaimed the short, fat, consequential-looking man, casting fierce glances around. "I call upon this meeting——"

"Order! order!" cried several voices.

"Chair! chair!" vociferated others.

"I call upon this meeting, I say," roared the little gentleman, becoming very red in the face, "to take notice that a jury of his countrymen has pronounced Nathaniel Sneaksby guilty of seducing a married woman——"

"Chair!"—"Order!"—"Chair!"—"Turn him out!" were the cries that now rose in quick succession from all parts of the meeting.

"Yes—turn him out!" bawled Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins from the platform:—and the stout gentleman was accordingly bundled from the hall, and thrust neck-and-crop into the street, with his coat slit up the back, his shirt-frill torn to shreds, and his hat as flat as a pancake.

This little affair being settled, to the indescribable relief of the Reverend Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, the Secretary was about to resume his Report; when another member in the body of the hall stood up to make a few remarks. Undeterred by the example of the stout, consequential-looking gentleman, this individual began to expatiate in an excited manner upon the monstrous extravagance evidenced in the administration of the Society;—and he was in the midst of a comparison of the sum absorbed in salaries with that which remained to carry out the objects of the association, when the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby rose from his chair, exclaiming, "Dear Christian friends, I put it to you whether this most indecent—this most indelicate—this most unheard-of interruption ought to continue?"

"No—no!"—"Order!"—"Chair!"—"Turn him out!" arose from every direction; and, in the twinkling of an eye, the Opposition-member was thrust violently towards the door—kicked ferociously down the steps—and bundled ignominiously out into the street, in as miserable a plight as his predecessor.

This second episode, which afforded uncommon delight to the Amazon, being terminated in so summary a manner, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins was at length permitted to continue the reading of his Report, which proceeded to set forth several examples and instances of the beneficial results achieved by the Society.

We quote a few of the specimens thus adduced.

"*Case the First.*—Jonathan Crick is a tailor by trade: age forty-seven. When a little turned of thirty, married a woman who proved to be much given to drink. Yielding to the effects of evil example, Jonathan Crick became a drunkard likewise. Neither he nor his wife ever went to church or chapel, and never saw a religious Tract. His business went to ruin; and he passed through the Insolvents' Court. Attributes his misfortunes to the want of religious Tracts. On coming out of prison, got a friend to be answerable for the rent of a small shop and to lend him a few pounds to stock it. But Mrs. Crick made away with everything she could lay her hand on in order to obtain drink. One day—nearly two years ago—one of the New Light's Tracts was left at Crick's shop. This was Tract 127, headed *The Fiery Furnace.* Mrs. Crick was sitting drunk by the fire when the Tract was placed in her hands. She dropped it upon the grate: it caught a-light—she tried to save it—and the flames were communicated to her dress. Before assistance could come, she was burnt to death. This circumstance produced a great effect upon Mr. Crick's mind; and being totally destitute of the wherewith even to buy bread, he resolved to abstain from strong drink. In due time a pious widow, belonging to the New Lights, visited the unhappy man with a bundle of the Society's Tracts. Crick knew her to be possessed of a competency; and he naturally felt interested in her. They sate down together and read Tract 613, headed *Balaam's Ass.* Greatly refreshed, Mr. Crick besought the pious widow to kneel down and pray with him. This she did; and every day

for six months she visited him. On each occasion Mr. Crick prayed devoutly in her presence. The good woman grew attached to the brand which she had plucked from the burning; and at the expiration of the six months she became his wife. Five months after their marriage they were blessed with a full-grown baby, which must be considered a signal mark of divine love for this good couple. Mr. Crick is now an influential, staunch, and regularly paying member of this Society, of the beneficial effects of which he is a striking example: for it was through Tract 127 that he lost a bad wife who drank away all his substance, and through Tract 613 that he obtained a good wife who brought him 200*l.* a-year. *Balaam's Ass*, glazed and framed, hangs over his mantel-piece.

"*Case the Second.*—Anthony Sawkins was until recently a tinker: age fifty-three. Had always been particularly fond of smoking. Used to be much addicted to lying in bed and smoking his pipe at the same time. His wife is a bustling, active, economical body, who has brought up a large family respectably, in spite of her husband's indolent habits, of which she vainly endeavoured to break him for many years. When lying in bed, Sawkins was wont to be perpetually bawling after her to come and bring him a light for his pipe. To save trouble she kept a constant supply of Difkin's Patent Self-acting Lights. About eighteen months ago the box containing these matches got damp, and they would not act. This caused Sawkins to be very violent one morning, because he was kept waiting for his favourite pipe. The wretched man abused his wife in the most ungodly style, calling her after the Woman of Babylon. At that moment Tract No. 1, entitled *The New Light*, was left at the house. '*There*!' exclaimed the excellent and pious Mrs. Sawkins, rolling up the paper into a pellet and flinging it at her husband; '*if the old lights won't do, try this New Light!*' The man read the Tract—got up and dressed himself—came to the Society's Office—and inquired whether the Committee wanted a bustling, active man to distribute its publications. Was at once taken into the Society's employment at a salary of twenty-five shillings a-week. Has proved very regular in his attendance, and is a staunch New Light. Says that he never earned more than ten shillings a-week as a tinker; and has every reason to bless the Tract Distribution Society.

"*Case the Third.*—James Clubber is a boy, aged fifteen. Never knew who his parents were: never went to school. Was a beggar in the streets until about a year ago. At that period he was passing by the Office of the Society, just as the printer was delivering in a hundred thousand copies of Tract No. 17, entitled *The Poor Boy's Friend.* By some accident, half a ton of the printed paper fell out of the cart upon James Clubber. He was taken up insensible, and carried into the Office. On being restored to life, he said that he was hungry; whereupon a good meal was given to him, and he speedily recovered altogether. Your Committee, perceiving something intelligent in the boy's countenance, determined to take him into the Society's employment. They did so; and he thankfully accepted the offer. When well dressed, well fed, well paid, and well treated altogether, James Clubber acknowledged that he was entirely indebted to Tract 17 for this signal change in his fortunes.

"*Case the Fourth.*—Elizabeth Jenkins was for many years housekeeper to an old gentleman: her age is now fifty-six. She was wont to be giddy, fond of dress, coquettish, and never went to church: neither did she ever read any religious works whatsoever. Now looks back with horror on her benighted condition and feels that it was entirely owing to the Society that she was ever brought to a state of soul-savouriness. For about fifteen months ago her master got hold of Tract 128, headed *The Deceitfulness of Riches.* He made her sit down and read it to him; and such was the effect produced upon his mind that he became convinced that riches were a curse to their possessor. Elizabeth Jenkins was suddenly inspired with the same holy belief; and she prayed and besought the old gentleman to turn all his property into gold—put the greater portion into a bag—and let her go and throw it into the Thames, so that the odious temptations of wealth might be triumphed over at once and for ever. The worthy man, whom our enemies declare to have been in his dotage at the time, complied with this pious suggestion: and Elizabeth Jenkins took away the bag in the middle of the night. Soon afterwards the old gentleman died, and was buried at the expense of the parish. Elizabeth Jenkins is now comfortably off, and thankfully ascribes her present happy position to that admirable Tract on the *Deceitfulness of Riches.*

"*Case the Fifth.*—Susan Bridewell, aged 23, belonged to the class of females termed 'unfortunate.' Was seduced by a Bishop when only fourteen. Lived with a Member of Parliament until she was eighteen; and being a girl of good education, helped him to frame a Bill for the Prevention of Immorality. The death of that gentleman in a fit of intoxication, threw Susan Bridewell upon the town. For four years she led a life of profligacy awful to contemplate; and, as she now declares, often has she cried and wept bitterly, when under the influence of strong waters, to enter into a state of grace. One night, about eleven months ago, she fell down in a hopeless condition of intoxication at the door of a house of ill-fame, in which she lodged. Fortunately for herself—fortunately for this Society—fortunately for the cause of morality, the revered and pious Nathaniel Sneaksby was passing at the moment. He raised her in his arms—he bore her up to her chamber—he laid her upon the bed—and, kneeling down, he prayed all night by her side. When she awoke in the morning, he exhorted her to turn away from her awful career and think of her salvation: and it will show you in what a benighted state this unhappy creature was, when we record the lamentable circumstance that she accused our respected brother, Mr. Sneaksby of a desire to take his departure without paying her for the alleged sale of her beauty. Vainly did he protest that he had found her drunk and incapable—that he had treated her as a Christian sister—and that he had sorrowed and prayed throughout the night on her behalf. His words were received with ribald laughter—his assurances with obscene jests; and all the Scarlet Women of Babylon dwelling in that house—yea, each one—did congregate and upbraid our brother Sneaksby with terrible revilings. He was therefore compelled to empty his purse for the behoof of those lost and unclean vessels; and he departed rather in sorrow than in anger. On his arrival at the Office of the Society, he selected Tract 307, headed *Come unto my arms, O Sinner!* and sent it to Susan Bridewell. An hour

afterwards she arrived in a hackney-coach, and had a long interview with Brother Sneaksby. Alone were they together for several hours; and those hours, Brother Sneaksby assures us, were passed in strenuous endeavours to bring her to a state of grace. He was successful; and the Committee, at once acceding to our reverend pastor's recommendations, took a respectable and comfortable lodging for the poor young woman. Brother Sneaksby continued to visit her frequently, remaining long with her each time, and regaling her with the most refreshing discourse. She told him her history; and he, with that laudable anxiety which ever animates him to forward the interests of the Society, proceeded at once to the Bishop who had originally seduced her, and menaced that wicked prelate with exposure. To avoid such a catastrophe, the Bishop gave a cheque upon his banker for a thousand guineas, whereof one-half was duly paid to the young woman and the other half into the treasury of the Society. Susan Bridewell is now living in comfort, happiness, and the practice of all Christian virtues; and she never thinks of the Tract headed *Come unto my Arms*, without feeling a deep sense of gratitude towards the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby."

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the tremendous enthusiasm with which these examples were received. Every one present, the Amazon alone excepted, appeared completely satisfied with such proofs of the beneficial influence and salutary tendency of the New Light Tract Distribution Society; and the last case, especially, enhanced almost into a worship the admiration already experienced towards the Reverend Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby.

Silence having been restored, it was moved, seconded, and carried that the Report be adopted; and the chairman then announced that "their very excellent, staunch, and well-tried friend, Mr. Blarney Gloze, would address the meeting."

"Christian friends," said the gentleman thus introduced, and who was a thin, dapper-looking, consequential personage,—"you will believe me when I declare that this Chewsday is the most se-uperlatively happy one I ever passed in all my life. It will pre-uve delightful ne-use for me to send to our Christian friends in the country,—ne-use informing them that this blessed jeu-bilee has placed the Ne-u Lights in so enjeuring a position. For do we not feel like men who, having fought a jewel against infidelity, have come off with no jubious victory—but with a certain triumph? The case of that poor ge-irl, S-eusan Bridewell, hath deeply touched my beu-zim; and I beg to propose a ve-ote of thanks and gratiteude to our dear friend whose ke-ounsel pre-uved so saleutary in her behalf."

"Christian friends," vociferated a stout, vulgar-looking, dogmatical man, suddenly springing up from his seat on the platform,—"I beg leave to second that motion. I conceive it a dooty we owe to our cheerman to testify our gratitood towards him. He has pursood a virtoous career; and every attriboot combines to render him sootable to the high post he okkipies amung us. A wote of thanks is his doo. Our friend Mr. Gloze has rightly said that this is a Toosday sooperlatively happy; and I agree with him that such a joobilee will constitoot glorious noose to send our brothren in the country. Like Mr. Gloze, too, do I look on this Toosday's proceedings as calquilated to place the Noo Lights in an endooring position: and, in the same way as our friend has so bootifully expressed his-self, do I feel like a man who has fout a dooel against infidelity, and come off with no doobious wictory. As for that poor gurl, Soosan Bridewell, I knoc her when fust Brother Sneaksby brought her to a state of grace; and my boo-zim melts when I think of all she has endoored. Christian friends, I beg to conclood by seconding the motion of thanks to the cheerman."

Both these speeches which we have recorded, were received with rapturous applause; and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby rose to deliver an oration in acknowledgment of the honour which had been done him.

But scarcely had the first nasal twang of his elocutionary style begun to vibrate through the air, when the Amazon felt a hand suddenly placed upon her shoulder.

She started—looked up—and beheld Tim Meagles behind her.

"Come, my beauty," he whispered, bending down his head towards her ear: "you must follow me away from this humbugging scene at once. There is better sport for us in view."

The beautiful huntress accordingly rose from her seat and accompanied Tim Meagles from the hall.

On reaching the street, he handed her into his gig: then, taking his own seat in the vehicle, he drove at a rapid rate towards Jermyn Street.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE EXPEDITION.

During the drive to his lodgings, Tim Meagles explained in a few hasty words that he was compelled to repair forthwith to Windsor Castle, upon very pressing business in behalf of the Prince of Wales; and he invited the Amazon to accompany him.

"The truth is, my beauty," he said, with a merry laugh, "I am going to pay my respects to his Majesty King George the Third: and as you and I are now rowing in the same boat with regard to certain little plans and intrigues of our own, I think it will be as well for you to go with me."

"Are you in earnest, Tim?" demanded the Amazon, with a smile which displayed her brilliant teeth between the moist red lips.

"Never more so in my life, Letitia," responded Meagles. "The moment we get to Jermyn Street, you will send for your horse—and you can also forward at the same time a note to Sir John, telling him that you will not be home until to-morrow afternoon or evening. You can do *this* — can't you?"

"Most assuredly," answered the huntress. "But is it your intention that I should merely accompany you to Windsor——"

"Not only to Windsor, my charmer," interrupted Meagles,—"but likewise into the very presence of George the Third himself."

"Then I must take a change of garments with me," observed Lady Lade: "and in order to select an appropriate attire, it is absolutely necessary that I should go home first——"

"No such thing!" exclaimed Meagles. "We will have some fun with the old King, depend upon it—and therefore you shall appear before him in your Amazonian garb. The instant he knows what

our business is, he will be civil enough, I can promise you. But here we are."

And as Meagles thus spoke, the gig stopped at Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street.

The instant that Tim and his fair companion got up-stairs, the requisite orders were issued for their journey; and a hasty note, which the Amazon penned to her husband, was despatched by Wasp to the baronet's house in King Street,—the page likewise receiving instructions to bring round her ladyship's favourite steed.

It was about half-past two o'clock when the preparations for departure were accomplished: and now behold Tim Meagles mounted on a spirited horse, which however knew its master's hand by the way in which he held the reins,—the Amazon bestriding a beautiful animal, whose curvettings at starting enabled her to display her unequalled skill in the equestrian art,—and Master Wasp seated on the prettiest pony that ever attracted notice with its exquisite shape and its graceful action.

Such was the cavalcade which now moved away from Jermyn Street, and proceeded gently over the stones until the good hard road was gained; and then the steeds broke into a smart trot.

Nothing could exceed the picturesque elegance of Lady Letitia's appearance as she sate, like a modern Diana the Huntress, upon that beautiful animal which she managed with such skill and which seemed proud to bear so lovely and interesting a burthen.

The fine, sharp, frosty air brought the richest carnation hues to the Amazon's cheeks: her eyes—those superb dark eyes—shone with the excitement of a kindred glow;—her luxuriant hair, glossy and silken, streamed in a myriad ringlets from beneath the broad-brimmed hat which she wore so jauntily and which gave a certain archness of expression to her handsome features.

And how faultless was her carriage—how full of winning grace and statuesque elegance was her attitude on horseback! The harmony of all the undulating lines which traced the fine contours, the rounded limbs, and the voluptuous reliefs of her symmetrical form,—the suppleness of which her organs were capable, the lightness of her movements, and the flexibility which distinguished her muscular powers,—and the superb swell of the bosom that seemed ready to burst through the tightly-fitting coat which served as an external indication of the luxuriance and firmness of that bust,—all these were set off to their utmost advantage by the feminine gracefulness mingled with the masculine skill and boldness which characterised her appearance as an equestrian.

Ten thousand times more attractive was she in her male attire than when dressed in the garb which properly belonged to her sex. For whereas the latter concealed all that fine sweeping length of limb which the Amazon possessed in such perfection,—so, on the other hand, did the tight breeches and the elegant boots develope and set off, rather than conceal, those robust but symmetrical proportions which we have just eulogised. In the same way did the close-fitting frock exhibit the great expansion of the hips—the waist that seemed so wasp-like in its slenderness when compared with the fulness of the contiguous parts—and that exuberant bust which a very critical judgment would have pronounced too large to satisfy a pure and delicate taste for beauty.

But a splendid creature was she, certainly—and well might Tim Meagles be proud of the companionship of that goddess-like horsewoman.

Her fine large dark eyes sparkled with vivacity and spirit: the smiles that wreathed her rich red lips were full of cheerfulness;—and the glowing colour which was heightened by exertion, resembled the brightest bloom of the carnation, dying off into ivory fairness.

To gaze upon her for a few moments, was sufficient to convince the beholder that to a gay and joyous nature she united a warm and voluptuous temperament,—and that boldly and fearlessly as she could dash along over gate and fence, and barrier and ditch, in the ardour of the chase, so meltingly and tenderly could she dissolve into amorous softness and yield herself up to the delicious abandonment of wanton dalliance.

Having trotted—then cantered—and then galloped along the road for some distance, the party reined in their steeds to a walk; and Meagles now related in full all the particulars of his interview with the Prince of Wales.

"Well," exclaimed the Amazon, laughing heartily, "this is about as amusing an adventure as I was ever led into, or as you and I were ever bent upon together. Here we are,—you in your riding-dress, and I in my huntress-garb,—on our way to Windsor Castle to demand an audience of the King;—and the object of that audience is the modest request of a peerage for some gentleman whose name is probably unknown to his Majesty's ears."

"I admit that the adventure is singular and the object is somewhat bold," said Meagles, echoing his fair companion's merry laugh: "but depend upon it, my beauty, that we will succeed. I have got the document—the precious document—in my pocket," he added, his tone suddenly becoming more serious: "and if his Majesty be proof against *that*—why, then I shall be most wonderfully mistaken."

"But for what reason on earth have you resolved to drag me into the royal presence?" inquired Lady Letitia.

"In the first place, my charmer," answered Tim, "because you and I are partners in certain schemes and plans——"

"But do you fancy, my dear fellow," interrupted the huntress, reproachfully, "that I cannot trust you to manage things by yourself? I would not wrong you to such an extent, Tim," she added, hastily: "for you know that I entertain an affection for you—and I believe that I am not altogether indifferent to you."

"You may well say that, Letitia!" ejaculated Meagles, although at the same instant the image of Rose Foster sprang up in his mind and caused him to heave a sigh. "But, as I was observing," he hurriedly continued, "I thought it right, in the first place, that you should come with me; and secondly, I wanted a cheerful companion. If you object to my first motive, you will at least give me credit for the latter."

"Ah! you are a good-for-nothing fellow, Tim," exclaimed the huntress, slashing him across the shoulders in a playful manner with her riding-whip. "And so I suppose we shall pass the night at Windsor—eh?" she observed, glancing archly towards him.

"As a matter of course—because we cannot hope to see his Majesty before to-morrow morning, al-

though we will endeavour to obtain an interview this evening," said Meagles. "But remember, my beauty, you will pass as Mrs. Meagles at the hotel at Windsor—and now you comprehend what *that* means."

"We shall see all about it presently, Tim," responded Lady Letitia, laughing. "I suppose that Wasp will tell no tales on our return to London."

"If Wasp were inclined to gossiping, he might have told enough concerning us long ago," said Meagles. "But neither he nor the excellent Mrs. Piggleberry ever seem to take the slightest notice when you pass the night with me at my lodgings."

"Hold your tongue, Tim!" exclaimed the Amazon. "It is positively shocking to talk in such a way in the broad daylight," she added, her merry laugh again ringing musically through the crisp sharp air. "And now tell me, Mr. Scape-grace, why you have undertaken that crusade against poor Mrs. Fitzherbert, whom the unprincipled George is thus resolved to persecute?"

"Mrs. Fitzherbert has always hated me as sincerely as the devil does holy water," answered Meagles; "and at times she has been most repulsively rude and insufferably insolent towards me. Now you know, my charmer, that I have never merited such treatment at her hands: for I have frequently rendered her little services which she ought not to forget. More than once have I taken her jewellery to the pawnbroker's for her when she was short of cash and the Prince had none to give her; and I have even given my own security and lent my own money to silence her most clamorous creditors. But I do not recollect that I have ever received from her lips a single word of thanks. She has treated me as if I were a lacquey—a lickspittle—a slave—a servile wretch who was only fitted to be employed in the vilest offices, and who was too well rewarded by the mere fact of being allowed to perform such services for Royalty. Now, my dear Letitia, could I do otherwise than smart under such behaviour as this?"

"I admit that the provocation is great, Tim," said the Amazon: "but you are too good-hearted a fellow to cherish vindictive feelings—especially against a poor weak woman, who will shortly find her own husband—for such indeed the Prince is—becoming her greatest enemy."

"Were it a mere question of vengeance, my darling huntress," responded Meagles, "I should scorn—despise the idea. Vengeance against a woman is beneath a man. But the conduct which I propose to pursue in respect to Mrs. Fitzherbert, essentially regards the particular schemes that you and I have formed. Therefore, as it suits my interests—or rather *our* interest—to league with the Prince against that lady, you can well comprehend that her conduct has not been such as to excite any compunction or remorse in my breast so as to induce me to hesitate ere I undertake this crusade against her."

"But I do not yet comprehend how it will serve our views to adopt such a course," said the Amazon.

"In a very few words I can explain myself," answered Meagles. "We wish to obtain as complete a hold upon the Prince as possible—do we not? Well—let him break with Mrs. Fitzherbert—let him marry the Princess of Brunswick—and he is ten thousand times more effectually in our power than at the present moment. For we possess the *proofs* of his union with Mrs. Fitzherbert—a Catholic——"

"I understand, Tim," interrupted Lady Lade: "an exposure of this marriage would prove ruinous to George, whether as Prince of Wales or King of England—and, as you justly observed, he becomes more completely enmeshed in our snares than ever."

"Then you approve of the course which I have undertaken to adopt?" said Meagles, inquiringly.

"Yes—now that I consider it in all its bearings," replied the Amazon. "Well," she added, with another merry laugh, "I do really believe that you will die a Duke in the end, Tim. But, remember," she exclaimed, her mirth subsiding into an arch smile,—"remember that I am also to be a Duchess."

"I have not forgotten our bargain, my love," exclaimed Meagles.

Thus speaking, he put spurs to his steed; and the party broke into a sharp trot.

It was about a quarter to five when they entered the town of Windsor; and, proceeding direct to the White Hart hotel, they put up their horses at the stables belonging to that establishment. Meagles then made inquiries of the landlord as to the probability of obtaining an audience of his Majesty that evening: but by the answers he received, he was speedily convinced that he must postpone all hope of seeing the King until the following morning. He accordingly signified his intention of passing the night at the hotel, and the landlord forthwith led the way to a handsome suite of apartments.

Being thus installed at the White Hart, in company with the Amazon, Meagles ordered an excellent dinner; while Wasp, who had received a hint to speak of the huntress as his master's wife, was suitably provided for in the kitchen.

By means of an excellent bottle of claret and a pleasant conversation, Tim Meagles and Lady Lade whiled away the time until eleven o'clock, when they retired to rest in each other's arms.

At half past nine on the following morning they were seated at breakfast; and when the meal was concluded, they sallied forth from the White Hart and proceeded in the direction of the Castle.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERVIEW.

We must now request our readers to accompany us into a small but elegantly furnished apartment in Windsor Castle.

A cheerful fire blazed in the grate; and, standing on the rug, with one arm leaning on the mantel, King George the Third was dictating a letter to a young lady of great beauty who was seated at a superb writing-table.

His Majesty was at this time fifty-seven years old. Naturally of a robust and vigorous constitution, he seemed well adapted to maintain a successful struggle against the influence of advancing age: but Care had accomplished what Time could not do—and had bowed the form and traced wrinkles upon the countenance of that monarch.

For, Oh! deep was the sorrow which his heart cherished, and bitter was the remorse which wrung his soul with anguish; and there were moments,

and hours, and days in that King's life when *he* envied the lot of the poorest of his subjects, and when *they* would not have envied him had all been known.

It has hitherto been the custom and the fashion to speak of George the Third in terms of praise: historians for the most part denominate him a good King—and monarchy-worshipping panegyrists have endowed him with every possible virtue. He has been called the Father of his People—the Paternal Sovereign—and a Pattern of Virtue and Morality: the world has been gravely told that England never was so happy, prosperous, and free as under his rule;—and it seems so natural to speak of "the good old times" of George the Third, that thousands of our readers will doubtless be astonished and startled when we assure them that a more infamous miscreant never disgraced a throne than that man!

A superstitious bigot in religious matters—entertaining the most implicit belief in the divine right of Kings—looking upon the people as having been made for him, and not himself for the people—of such a diabolically cruel disposition that he never would exercise the prerogative of mercy, but gloated over the idea of miserable wretches being strung up in dozens and half-dozens at a time—so heartlessly tyrannical that he waged a sanguinary war against the brave Americans when they so gloriously threw off his infernal yoke—so wedded to despotic notions that he expended hundreds of millions of treasure and poured forth British blood in torrents in order to combat the French Revolution and its effects—and of such a base, mean, cowardly, and despicable character that he not only persecuted men with unrelenting bitterness for their political and religious opinions, but also employed spies, agents, and informers to get up public meetings and disturbances, in order that the people might be mown down by artillery and cut to pieces by charging cavalry,—such was George the Third!

But who was the beautiful young woman that was writing at the table on the occasion of which we are now especially speaking?

She was the King's favourite daughter, the Princess Amelia.

In personal appearance and in disposition there was a great similitude between this Princess and her sister Sophia, whom we have already introduced to our readers.

The beauty of Amelia was however, of a more voluptuous cast than that of Sophia.

Her complexion was dazzlingly fair—enriched upon the cheeks with the sweetest and most delicate vermeil bloom. When her mind was perfectly tranquil and her pulses were not quickened by the excitement of thoughts, or passions, or emotions,—then did the soft lustre of her large blue eyes shed the calmest expression over her entire countenance, giving an air of pensive repose to her features. When gently moved by pleasurable feelings, the glances of those azure orbs and the soft smile that played around her mouth, denoted the union of a warm heart with a kind and generous nature: but when more profoundly excited, the looks and the manners of the Princess evinced all the vivid and varying sensibilities of an impassioned woman. Then, too, her eyes would swim in a voluptuous languor: the flush of sensuality would appear upon her countenance—and the heightening scarlet of the full, pouting, and almost coarse lips would indicate strong desires and a licentious imagination.

Her figure was more full and of richer contours than even that of her sister Sophia. Her sloping shoulders were softly rounded, giving her the faintest, slightest semblance of stooping: and yet they borrowed the appearance of breadth from the well-expanded chest, whence the bosoms rose grandly. But in their luxuriance, these large glowing orbs were scarcely divided in the middle—while laterally they protruded on the space occupied by the arms. The whole form of the Princess Amelia was characterised by *embonpoint*, and was soft, full, and voluptuous in the extreme,—leaving the waist, however, sufficiently symmetrical, though by no means sylph-like. Indeed, her Royal Highness was a perfect Hebe in the style of her beauty and the luscious ripeness of her charms;—and, alike in person and in temperament, did she appear to have been formed by nature for the enjoyment of wanton pleasures.

Over those shoulders so dazzlingly white,—not snowy nor like alabaster, but of the inimitable whiteness of living flesh which is fair and soft to the eye,—over those shoulders, we say, flowed a profusion of silky hair, not so colourless as flaxen nor so deep as auburn—but of the bright and glossy golden hue which exists between.

Such was the Princess Amelia;—and although her form, expanded into the luxuriance of womanhood, gave her the appearance of at least three or four and twenty years of age,—yet in reality was she only eighteen.

It was about a quarter past ten o'clock in the morning when we thus introduce our readers to the King and his favourite daughter.

The former was dictating, and the latter was writing, a letter to the Princess Caroline of Brunswick, who had already been fixed upon as the future spouse of the Prince of Wales: for whenever a member of the English Royal Family requires a husband or a wife, as the case may be, recourse is invariably had to the tribe of beggarly German pauper princes and princesses;—and thence has it arisen that England is either infested with these greedy and disgusting foreign leeches whose ravenous maws are never satiated with drinking the heart's blood of the toiling, starving, oppressed, and trampled-on industrious classes,—or else our treasury is compelled to grant revenues to those petty potentates who would not even be blessed with a thatch to their houses if it were not for British gold.

But John Bull is the greatest fool in all Christendom: for not contented with ministering to the rapacity of those titled robbers denominated the aristocracy, he must need permit the paltriest German rascals and demireps that ever bore jaw-breaking names to plunder him in the most flagrant manner, just because they are Grand-Dukes or Dukes, and Grand-Duchesses or Duchesses!

Let us however continue our narrative before we lash ourselves into a fury at these iniquities.

The Princess Amelia had just closed, sealed, and addressed her letter, when a page entered to inform his Majesty that a lady and gentleman humbly besought an audience on behalf of certain matters connected with his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

At the mention of his eldest son's name, a cloud spread rapidly over the countenance of the King: but checking the ejaculation of displeasure which had risen to the very tip of his tongue, he demanded whether the lady and gentleman who sought an interview had given their names.

The page handed his Majesty a card, whereon appeared the name of Mr. Meagles.

"I've heard of him—I've heard of him!" ejaculated the monarch, flinging the card petulantly upon the writing-table, and speaking with more than his usual volubility. "Pitt, who knows everything—everything—says he's a sad dog—sad dog. And he's very intimate with George, too—very intimate: a drinking companion, I'll be bound—I'll be bound. I will not see him at all," added the King, turning abruptly towards the page and speaking as savagely as if it were the page himself who was giving offence or annoyance.

The youth bowed and was retreating towards the door, when the Princess Amelia, who had taken up the card and looked at it, made a rapid sign for him to remain: then, rising from her seat, and approaching her father, she said, "You know, sire, that this gentleman—Mr. Meagles, I believe," she added, glancing at the card to assure herself that she had pronounced the name correctly,—"is a very intimate friend of my brother; and it can be no ordinary matter which has led Mr. Meagles to solicit a private audience of your Majesty."

"Do you think so, 'Melia?—do you think so?" exclaimed the King, who had a nervous habit of reiterating the half broken and jerking kind of sentences of which his conversation was composed.

"I do indeed think, my dear father, that you ought to see this Mr. Meagles," said the Princess, in a firm tone but with a sweetly coaxing and irresistibly winning manner.

"Well, well—I will see him—Meagles, eh?—Meagles—Meagles," exclaimed his Majesty, as if practising his tongue to pronounce the name correctly. "Queer appellation, that—very queer! Meagles—Meagles—Meagles," continued the monarch, in a musing style.

"The page is awaiting your Majesty's commands," said the Princess.

"Oh! commands—eh? Meagles—eh?" cried the King, still harping with a species of childishness or imbecility upon the name. "Meagles—Meagles! Well—let Mr. Meagles be introduced into our presence—and Mrs. Meagles, too: for I suppose it must be Mrs. Meagles who is with him. Meagles—Meagles!"

And his Majesty kept on repeating the name for at least a dozen times, but in a sinking tone—so that at last the iteration ended in an inaudible whisper.

The page, understanding that he was to bring the visitors into the royal presence, bowed and withdrew; and the Princess Amelia likewise retired.

King George the Third then began to pace the room in a nervous manner and with uneven steps—renewing his muttered iterations of the name of Meagles.

At length the door was thrown open—and the page announced "Mr. and Mrs. Meagles" in a loud voice.

Another moment—and Tim and the Amazon stood in the presence of the King!

Now George the Third was a great stickler for Court etiquette; and when his eyes encountered the gentleman in a riding-dress and the lady in her male attire, each too with whip in hand, a frown of displeasure gathered rapidly upon that countenance which was usually so stolid, vacant, and inane in its expression.

Meagles instantaneously saw that the King was displeased — and the huntress also observed that sinister cloud spreading upon the royal features: and the truth struck them both at the same instant. But for this little incident they were not altogether unprepared; and Meagles hastened to offer those excuses which he deemed suitable.

"Your Majesty is surprised—and doubtless offended," he said, in a very respectful tone, "that Mrs. Meagles should have ventured to appear in such an attire before your Majesty—or that I should have been bold enough to come hither otherwise than in the costume befitting a Court. But we are plain, honest, every-day kind of people; and we hope your Majesty will give us credit for acting on the impulses of a moment when the object is to serve a friend. In plain terms, the business which has brought us to Windsor Castle is of so pressing a nature that we really had not time to make any change in our costume."

"And your name is Meagles—Meagles—eh?" gasped the King, eyeing him with great suspicion.

"Such is my name, at your Majesty's service," was the reply. "Your Majesty's son, the Prince of Wales, usually calls me '*Tim*'—and sometimes '*My dear Tim.*' As for my creditors—they call me '*honest Mr. Meagles.*'"

"Well—well," exclaimed his Majesty, not knowing exactly what to make of the gentleman, and uncertain whether to give him credit for matchless impudence or genuine John Bull bluntness: "we shall know more of you presently, I dare say—I dare say. And this is Mrs. Meagles—eh?"

"That is Mrs. Meagles, may it please your Majesty," answered Tim.

"Fine woman—monstrous fine woman," muttered the King to himself, as he surveyed the Amazon from head to foot: and, while his eyes were thus wandering leisurely and scrutinizingly over her splendid form, as she stood in a graceful attitude of dignified self-possession before him, a glimmering of satisfaction appeared upon his countenance. "Ah! fine woman, Mrs. Meagles," he repeated in a louder tone: "very fine woman—Mrs. Meagles—monstrous fine woman! Dress not so unbecoming after all—not near so unbecoming: rather suitable, on the contrary—rather suitable."

And then, turning slowly away, he seated himself in an arm-chair near the writing-table.

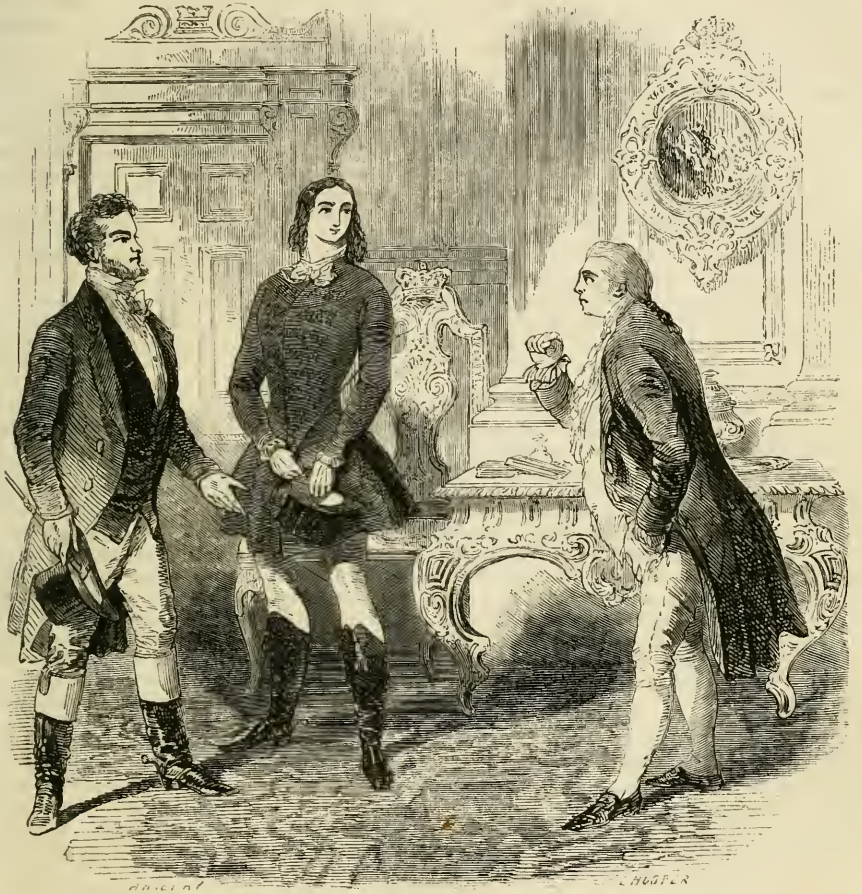
"You've quite charmed his wicked old eye, my beauty," said Meagles in a low tone to the Amazon.

"Eh! what—what?" ejaculated the King, starting up again. "What's that you said, Mr. Meagles—what's that? Something about an eye?"

"I ventured to observe, sire," was the cool but respectful response, "that I flattered myself that my wife had found favour in your Majesty's royal eye."

"Oh! ah! Well—there's no harm in saying *that*—no harm at all, Mr. Meagles," exclaimed King George the Third, quietly resuming his seat. "Come, now—what is the motive of your presence here?—why have you besought an audience of your Sovereign? From the observations you have already made, Meagles, I do not suppose that the Prince has wronged this lady—your wife, I mean—Mrs. Meagles."

"Very far from it, may it please your Majesty," answered Tim. "The truth is, my wife is so deeply imbued with a sense of his Royal Highness's inva-



riable kindness, condescension, and goodness towards me, that she insisted upon accompanying me to Windsor Castle in the hope that her prayers and entreaties, when united with my own, would have additional weight in the consideration of your Majesty."

"Prayers!—entreaties! How now?" ejaculated the King. "What is the matter? Speak out, Meagles — or do you speak for your husband, madam."

"May it please your Majesty," said the Amazon, advancing a little closer towards the King, and then standing with a most graceful and elegant attitude in his presence,—"it is on behalf of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales that my husband and myself have ventured to appear before our Sovereign—fully convinced that our good and gracious King will at all events accord us a patient hearing, the more so inasmuch as it is no favour that we seek on our own account."

"Prettily expressed — musical voice — good teeth," muttered the King to himself: then, in a louder tone, he said, "Go on, Mrs. Meagles—I am listening with attention, Mrs. Meagles. Go on."

"Profoundly does it afflict me, may it please your Majesty," she resumed, "that——"

"No—no: it doesn't please me that you should be afflicted, Mrs. Meagles," exclaimed George III, interrupting her in almost a playful manner. "But go on—go on—Mrs. Meagles: I'm all attention again—all attention."

"I was about to inform your Majesty," continued the Amazon, "that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has had the misfortune to seduce a young lady of good family——"

"Had the misfortune!" ejaculated the King, springing to his feet. "The misfortune do you call it, Mrs. Meagles?—misfortune, indeed—misfortune! And pray is there no misfortune on the other side? Has the young lady nothing to complain

of, Mrs. Meagles? Come—answer me. Misfortune, indeed!"

And his Majesty sank back again into the arm-chair.

"I meant to observe, may it please you, sire," continued the huntress, after darting a sly glance at Tim Meagles, who enjoyed the whole scene uncommonly,—"I meant to observe that it was a great misfortune for both parties:—for the young lady, because she belongs to a family connected with the peerage—and for his Royal Highness, because he must take some immediate step to hush the matter up."

"And for this purpose he has sent you both to me," exclaimed the King, once more leaping from his seat, and now flying into a passion. "Upon my word—a pretty misfortune, truly—seductions right and left come to my knowledge—and the hero—always George Prince of Wales! Pretty misfortune, indeed! Young lady connected with the peerage! Who is she, madam?" he demanded, turning abruptly round upon the Amazon as if he were about to snap her head off.

"Her name is Octavia Clarendon, may it please your Majesty," was the response: "her father is distantly related to the Lord Marchmont."

"Ah! the Lord Marchmont—good Tory—staunch supporter—pillar of the throne!" ejaculated the King: then growing considerably calmer, he shook his head, saying. "This affair must indeed be looked into. Won't do to offend a man like Lord Marchmont—always votes in favour of Ministerial measures. Lord Marchmont—good Tory—would vote black's white, or white's black, to please me. Ah! he is a true aristocrat—a staunch noble—Lord Marchmont! Well Mrs. Meagles—I suppose that as yet this misfortune has been hushed up?"

"Such is the case, may it please your Majesty," answered Lady Lade.

"And what do you propose?—what do you suggest?—what do you require me to do?" demanded the King, resuming his seat.

"To confer the honour of a peerage, with an accompanying pension, upon Mr. Clarendon, the father of this young lady whom the Prince has seduced," was the response.

"Never!" ejaculated George III, his puffy cheeks becoming purple with rage: and, bounding from his chair, he stood for a few moments gazing ferociously upon the Amazon, but unable to utter another word. "No—never!" he at length exclaimed. "I am not to be persuaded into such a course as this. What! dishonour the peerage by selling it, as it were, for a girl's beauty! Upon my word, Mrs. Beagles—no, Meagles—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Meagles—I am surprised that you and your husband should have had the audacity to seek my presence for such a purpose. Our interview is at an end—the audience is closed."

And the King, turning abruptly away, was advancing towards the door of an inner room, when Tim Meagles exclaimed, "One word, may it please your Majesty!"

"One word?" repeated the King, stopping short. "What for, sir?—what more can you or your wife have to say to me? One word, indeed—one word!"

"Yes—one word," exclaimed Meagles, emphatically: "for your Majesty does not appear to be fully aware of the seriousness—the extreme seriousness——"

"The seriousness of what, sir?" demanded the King, now turning completely round and retracing his steps towards his importunate visitors: "the seriousness of what, sir—of what?" he reiterated nervously.

"Of his Royal Highness's position," answered Meagles, in a firm and resolute manner.

"It is not I who have placed him in it," exclaimed his Majesty: "he has done it all himself—all himself. You may retire, Mr. Meagles—Meagles—you may retire: any further colloquy will be useless—quite useless."

"Nay—then your Majesty will drive his Royal Highness to extremes," said Tim; "and the unpleasant effects of this affair will not be experienced by him alone."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired the King, struck by the mingled singularity and audacity of an observation the covert menace of which was unmistakable: "what do you mean? Speak—sir: what do you mean?" he repeated petulantly.

"I mean, sire," responded Tim Meagles, looking the monarch full in the face, "that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will not fall alone. If he sink beneath the weight of infamy and shame, he will drag down others with him—yes—even though it be his own father. And that is God's truth!"

George III sank upon a chair, gasping for breath. Was it possible that he had heard aright?—or had his ears deceived him? He closed his eyes for a few moments, the more easily to commune with himself by shutting out all exterior objects from his view: and this brief but painful interval of reflection convinced him that it was no delusion—that his ears had *not* misled him—and that a threat, darkly intelligible, had been uttered by the daring man who still stood in his presence.

Then all the vindictive blood of the Guelphs rushed to his countenance—tinging even the whites of his eyes and making the orbs themselves seem ready to start out of his head: and, springing from his chair, he threw a furious look upon Meagles, exclaiming, "I understand you, sir—I understand you! My son has made you the instrument and agent of his own vile undutifulness; and you are base enough to lend yourself to his parricide intentions. But you may return to him, sir—you may return to him—and tell him that I defy his menaces. Yes—I—his father—I—the King—scorn and laugh at this silly attempt—to—to——"

"Your Majesty should know that hard words do not break bones," interrupted Tim Meagles, in a tone and manner so full of easy defiance that the King was perfectly staggered. "Your Majesty has thought fit to couple my name in an injurious fashion with that of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales: but I am tough enough to bear all your Majesty has just said—and a great deal more."

"This to me, sir!" ejaculated George III, now literally foaming with rage. "Begone!"—and he extended his hand towards the bell-pull.

"One word!—only one word more!" cried Meagles. "Does your Majesty really wish that a certain certificate should be published to the world——"

"I care not!" exclaimed the King, still holding the bell-pull. "As my scapegrace son's boon companion, you are of course in the secret respecting that fragment of a document——"

"Fragment!" repeated Meagles; "fragment did your Majesty say? I beg your pardon, sire—but the whole paper is in our possession—in *my* possession——"

"It's false, sir—it's false!" ejaculated George III. "My son has often told me that before—but he never could produce more than one-half——"

"Your Majesty may now, therefore, have an opportunity of seeing the whole," said Meagles, in a tone of calm confidence almost bordering upon cool insolence, as he displayed the perfect certificate.

"And a very pretty production it would be to print and issue to the world," observed the Amazon, again coming to her paramour's assistance.

"Ah! you would not dare—no—you could not," gasped the wretched King, as the proof—the damning proof of his atrocious perjury to Hannah Lightfoot was thus placed before his eyes: for a single glance at the document was sufficient to convince him that the missing half was really found, and that no forgery had been accomplished to supply its place.

Sinking back into the seat which he had resumed and quitted with such nervous frequency during this memorable interview, the King covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud in the bitterness of his spirit. He forgot that there were persons present to see and hear him: and even if he had remembered the fact, he could not have suppressed that evidence of emotions profoundly excited.

For, oh! in the heart of this tyrant King a certain chord had been made to vibrate with ineffable anguish; and with whirlwind speed had memory traversed the gulf of many, many years,—going back to those days—the days of his youth—when he had loved for the first time—nay, for the only time in all his life—and when he tasted of that drop of balm which turns the gall of this world's cup into a delicious nectar. For such is woman's affection: and it was the love of a tender and confiding soul which was given to him! Then, although he had learnt to appreciate how delicate is the fabric of the female heart, yet had he rudely broken the hallowed tie which bound such a heart to him; and he knew that the being who had adored him too tenderly and cherished his image all too fondly, had gone down into a premature grave—the victim of his perjury—a sacrifice to his broken vows! Long years—oh! long and many years had been reckoned and numbered since *then:* he had married *another*—and a numerous family had sprung up around him. But though perfidy may have its hour and seduction its triumph, yet remorse never fails sooner or later to exact its debt. And thus were there seasons when the soul of this bad King was rent with the anguish of a conscience suffering all the torture and crucifixion of memory's scorpion-stings: for though time had passed over his heart, it was only to reveal it, in his old age, like the disentombed city, with all the hopes and passions of an earlier period preserved in the very lava which had choked them!

For nearly five minutes did King George III remain thus absorbed in the most excruciating reflections: and Tim Meagles and the Amazon dared not even exchange glances with each other—for they felt a secret awe at having thus plunged a crowned monarch into so deep an abyss of humiliation and mental pain.

At length the King raised his head hastily;—and, beckoning Meagles to approach, he said in a low and sadly altered tone, "Am I to understand that the document which you have shown me will be given up when the demand of my son is complied with?"

"Your Majesty cannot expect that I should part with so interesting a relic," observed Meagles: then, fixing his eyes significantly upon the monarch's countenance, he added, "Such a piece of paper, sire, is worth a dukedom."

"Heaven protect my son—heaven guard him from these extortioners—when he succeeds me!" murmured the King, with a slight access of returning irritability: but, immediately suppressing his rising anger and steadying his trembling nerves with all the effort of which he was capable, he said in a louder tone, "Mr. Meagles, you will not publish that document?—you cannot wish to do so? No—no—I am sure you cannot. And now listen to me attentively—very attentively."

His Majesty paused for a few moments, while both Meagles and the Amazon drew nearer towards him.

"You are sensible people—both of you—very sensible people, I am confident," resumed the King; "and you must therefore see that I cannot grant a peerage in this abrupt, sudden, and extraordinary manner. But I will tell you what I can do, Mr. Meagles—and Mrs. Meagles. I will speak to Pitt about Lord Marchmont—I will tell him that I wish to confer a mark of my esteem on that nobleman—and then he will institute inquiries respecting his lordship's family and relatives. You understand me—eh? Well, the name of Mr. Clarendon will thus transpire—and all I want is to be able to bring it on the *tapis*. The rest is easily managed—easily managed," added the King, speaking in a musing tone to himself rather than addressing his words to those whose ears they however reached. "Yes—yes—there will be no difficulty—no difficulty. Mr. Meagles—Mr. Meagles," exclaimed his Majesty with startling suddenness after a few moments' pause, —"you may return to my son and inform him that for the last time I consent to help him out of his embarrassment. Within a week or ten days a peerage shall be offered to this Mr. Clarendon of whom you have spoken. In the interval the most rigid secrecy must be maintained respecting the negotiation. I presume that your Mr. Clarendon is as yet ignorant of his daughter's shame?"

Meagles replied in the affirmative.

"So much the better," continued the King, speaking in a more collected manner than he had yet done. "Now, understand me well, Mr. Meagles—and you also, Mrs. Meagles,—understand me, I repeat, when I say that not a hint of all this must be breathed to Mr. Clarendon until my Minister shall have officially communicated my royal will and pleasure with regard to him. On the same day that this communication is made, the Prince of Wales shall receive a hint to that effect. Then—and not till *then*, Mr. Meagles—may it be intimated to Mr. Clarendon that this boon of a peerage, with an accompanying pension, is the price of his silence and forbearance—— You know what I mean," added the monarch impatiently, as he sprang with characteristic abruptness from his seat.

"I understand your Majesty fully," said Meagles; "and I thank your Majesty for the gracious promise of which I shall now be the joyful messenger to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

The King scarcely waited to hear the conclusion of this sentence, but retired to the inner room.

Tim Meagles and the Amazon then quitted Windsor Castle, well pleased with the result of their interview.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE PRINCESS AMELIA.

THE favourite daughter of George III, upon leaving the King in order that he might grant an audience to Mr. Meagles and his fair companion, retired into an adjacent room, where she endeavoured to amuse herself with a book. But feeling convinced that something unpleasant had occurred in respect to her brother the Prince of Wales, and dreading that such intelligence might produce a disagreeable effect upon her father, her uneasiness became most painful; and when she heard the King talking in a loud and angry tone in the next room, she was quite unable to endure the torture of suspense any longer.

Approaching the door communicating with that apartment, she became a listener just at that point in the discourse when her father, interrupting the Amazon's narrative, dwelt with such emphatic reiteration on the word "misfortune." But it was not until several more sentences had been exchanged between his Majesty and the Amazon, that the Princess Amelia learnt the entire truth: namely, that her eldest brother had seduced a young lady of respectable family—that the name of the victim was Octavia Clarendon—that she was related to Lord Marchmont—and that a peerage and pension for the father were suggested as the means of hushing up the girl's disgrace and the heir-apparent's treachery.

The Princess Amelia was shocked, certainly—but not particularly amazed. The irregularities, gaieties, and gallantries of her eldest brother were too numerous, too notorious, and too flagrant to be entirely a secret to her; and indeed, the King was often wont to deplore, when alone with his favourite daughter, the course of life which the Prince of Wales was leading.

She was not surprised, then, we say, when from the discourse now passing between his Majesty and the Amazon she gathered the particulars of her brother's new freak and the embarrassment in which it had plunged him: nor was she astonished when her sire so peremptorily and irascibly refused the peerage which was demanded for Mr. Clarendon.

But no pen can depict her amazement and indignation when she heard Meagles take up the thread of the conversation and utter dark menaces. She could scarcely believe her ears: she listened with suspended breath;—her bosom was as motionless and still as if she were a marble statue!

"*I mean, sire, that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will not fall alone. If he sink beneath the weight of infamy and shame, he will drag down others with him—yes—even though it be his own father.*"

Such were the words which the Princess Amelia caught: such were the words that her brother's emissary dared address to her own father—the King of England!

But the scene which followed was of more ominous significancy and more tremendously mysterious import. For Meagles grew bolder: he spoke in a tone of easy defiance to his Majesty;—and then came the rapidly exchanged but emphatic sentences concerning the certificate.

The Princess Amelia was stupified—astounded. Pale as marble, she leant against the door for support. She heard her father sob—and she could not fly to his assistance. Her limbs were paralysed—her very breath was suspended. A dumb, dead bewilderment was upon her: an awful consternation held her powerless — motionless — voiceless. Even her eyes did not wink—her lips remained apart—her breast was upheaved and still.

What could the document be that Meagles had produced?—what spell did it exercise over her sire?—what crime or misfortune on his part had endowed it with such appalling influence?

Fleet as lightning did these questions flash through her brain:—but how was her imagination to suggest the answers to them?

Hark!—the silence in the next room is now broken again: the King speaks. She listens, as if her life were dependent on catching the words which he utters. He demands that the document be given up to him. Meagles refuses. Nay—he even declares with confidence that its price is a dukedom!

A cold tremor—as if a snake were slowly coiling its slimy folds about her—passed gradually over the form of the Princess: for that her father must have committed some dreadful crime, or that Meagles was the depositor of some tremendous secret respecting the Royal Family, was evident. Otherwise, how would this man have dared not only to bandy words with the King of England—but likewise to dictate his own terms in a tone proving that he had not miscalculated the extent of the terrible influence which he thus wielded over the unhappy monarch.

And now the Princess Amelia heard her sire assent to those conditions—nay, even humiliate himself so far as to admit that he must use subterfuge and artifice with his Prime Minister in order to procure the peerage and the pension for Mr. Clarendon.

A death-like sensation came upon the wretched Princess. She loved her father as dearly as ever child was devoted to a parent: and the discourse which she overheard had revealed things—or rather excited alarms and apprehensions of so vague, uncertain, yet terrible a character that the chill of the grave appeared to have seized upon her. But this feeling rapidly yielded to one more intense and excruciating still: for when she thought of the deep humiliation to which her father was reduced—and that father a King—she felt as if red-hot iron were searing her heart and drops of molten lead trickling upon her brain. Then—in order to avoid giving utterance to the hysterical cry which rose to her very lips—she suddenly tore herself away from the door to which her ear had hitherto been rivetted; and, with steps that were staggering and uneven although so rapid, she fled to her own apartment.

Throwing herself upon a sofa, the young Princess burst into an agony of weeping. Torrents of tears now poured forth from the eyes that had hitherto been so hot and dry; and her bosom—that fair virgin breast—heaved with convulsive sobs, as if her heart must break.

But in a few minutes that flood of anguish was followed by the relief which tears invariably afford; and the violence of her affliction subsided. By degrees, however, she experienced a suffocating sensation—a want of the fresh air—and a longing to feel

the cold breeze fan her burning brow and her flushed cheeks.

Hastily putting on a modest bonnet and a simple scarf lined with furs, the Princess descended to the gardens attached to the Castle. But perceiving some members of the royal household walking in those grounds, and wishing to give way in solitude to the thoughts which oppressed her, she turned her steps in another direction and entered the park.

So modest was her apparel—so mournful was her demeanour—so woe-begone her countenance—and so agitated her walk, that a stranger would never have suspected her to be one of the high-born and envied daughters of England's Royalty.

And, in truth, the young Princess was thoroughly wretched: for her soul was filled with the gloomiest presentiments in regard to her father—her eldest brother—aye, her entire family;—and she could not help thinking, within the profoundest recesses of her own heart, that there was a curse instead of a blessing attendant upon the British crown!

Presently her thoughts settled almost completely upon her eldest brother, the Prince of Wales; and so fully did she become absorbed in contemplating his career and painfully wondering to what ignominious catastrophe it would probably lead, that she forgot the scene which had ere now taken place at the Castle.

It was while in this deeply reflective mood, that the Princess Amelia suddenly observed an individual leaning in a melancholy attitude against a tree. Tall, well-formed, and handsomely dressed, this person immediately rivetted her gaze: for she felt convinced that it was the object of her thoughts —her brother — George Prince of Wales. His arms were folded across his ample chest—his eyes were fixed on the ground—he was evidently absorbed in deep meditation.

"Ah!" thought the Princess within herself; "I understand the meaning of his presence here! Tortured by suspense, he is waiting for his emissaries, to learn the issue of their interview with our august father. Poor brother! with all his faults I love him well—and more than ever now that I am confident he is unhappy! But at least it will be in my power to relieve him of that anxiety which is wringing his soul at present: yes—I can so far cheer him with the assurance that the peerage will be granted to Mr. Clarendon, and that the existing cause of a cruel embarrassment will therefore be hushed up."

These ideas rushed through the brain of the tender-hearted and amiable Princess in far less time than we have occupied in recording them; and hastily approaching the individual who was leaning against the tree, she threw herself upon his breast, overcome by her feelings—thus making him aware of her presence and her sorrow at the same instant.

The individual started with an amazement which the Princess did not however perceive—for she was now blinded with her tears and suffocated with her sobs. All the features—all the details—all the particulars of the scene which had taken place within the hour, rushed to her mind:—her father's humiliation — Meagles' triumph — the mysterious document—everything sprang into vivid being in her memory. And she knew that her brother was the cause of all the anguish, degradation, and disgrace through which her sire had thus passed: she recollected, moreover, that this same brother it was who had sent his emissaries to threaten, coerce, and intimidate that father whom she so fondly loved; and her gentle spirit was wounded sorely—her kind heart was rent with the cruel paroxysms which were only partially relieved by the torrents of tears that she now shed so abundantly, as she clung to the arms of him who supported her from falling.

"O George, my dearest brother! what have you done?" she exclaimed at length, but in a voice half suffocated with sobs. "Is it possible that you could have had recourse to menaces in order to compel your father—your King——"

"In the name of heaven, illustrious lady—for that such you are, I gather from your words—be cautious what you say. There is some strange mistake——"

A shriek burst from the lips of the Princess, as she started wildly from the half embrace in which she was held, or rather into which she had thrown herself: and casting one searching, penetrating, agonizing look upon the handsome though mournful countenance which now wore an expression of the profoundest respect mingled with a tender interest, —she exclaimed, "Just heaven! what have I done?"

And she would have fallen forward on the ground, had not the gentleman caught her in his arms.

But she had fainted!

He threw a rapid look around: not a soul was nigh to render aid or run for succour—the Castle was a mile distant—and there was not even a drop of water near to sprinkle upon the marble brow of the Princess—for such he concluded, from the words she had spoken, that she must be.

Kneeling upon the grass, he sustained her in his arms—loosened the scarf lined with furs from about her neck—unfastened the ribands of her bonnet—and thus did all he could, consistently with an honourable delicacy and propriety, to give her air.

Then, as she lay thus motionless and deprived of sense in his arms, he could not help being struck by the loveliness of her countenance and the softly rounded outlines of her figure. Even amidst the deep melancholy which filled his breast, there stole into existence a feeling of the tenderest interest as he thus contemplated the inanimate form of the Princess. Her face, from which all the colour had fled, was so exquisitely sweet and so touchingly beautiful in its death-like rigidity and its marble hue, that it appeared as if the dream of a poetic genius had been wrought into mimic life by the hand of the statuary. And as the individual who sustained her in his arms gazed on that countenance, a deep, deep sigh rose from the profoundest abyss of his soul: for had any one a few minutes previously assured him that his feelings would be stirred so soon and his heart moved by the beauty of aught in female shape, he would have declared that love for him was as a flower which had faded in his soul—a leaf which had withered—and that naught could re-awaken the subtle passion, nor rekindle its volcanic fire to dart through the ruins it had once filled and scorched!

And now a tender bloom began to re-appear upon the cheeks of the Princess—a deeper tint suffused the lips that were now stirred with the wavering breath of returning animation—her bosom rose and fell slowly, but visibly—and opening her azure

orbs she gazed up into the countenance that was bending over her.

At first there was a dull vacancy in that look—but the next moment the pupils of those sweet eyes were lighted up with the resuscitating beams of intelligence;—and recollecting all that had occurred, the Princess said in a faint and tremulous tone, "I thank you, sir, for this kind attention on your part. A mistake—a strange mistake——"

And stopping short, as the reminiscence flashed to her mind that she had thrown herself weeping and sobbing upon the breast of a stranger, she blushed the deepest crimson.

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured that I am a man of honour," was the earnest and impressive response, as the gentleman delicately and tenderly assisted the Princess to regain her feet; "and the words which fell from your lips ere now shall never be repeated by me. I can well understand how the error occurred—for I am no stranger to the fact that a marvellous resemblance subsists between myself and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"So extraordinary a likeness I never beheld till now!" murmured the Princess Amelia, casting a timid look upon the countenance which still wore an expression of extreme mournfulness mingled with a tender interest: then, hastily re-arranging her dress, she said, "Again I thank you, sir, for the courtesy—nay, the generosity of your behaviour towards me. May I request to be made acquainted with the name of one to whom I shall ever be under a great obligation?"

"Doubtless my romantic history and cruel misfortunes are not altogether unknown even to a lady so highly placed and so far removed from the world's ordinary sphere, as your Royal Highness," said the gentleman. "For a short time was I the object of universal execration. A number of crimes, any one of which was sufficient to stamp a man with unredeemable infamy——"

"Ah! I know you, sir—and I sincerely, most sincerely sympathise with your misfortunes," exclaimed the Princess Amelia, a sudden light breaking in upon her memory. "I read your case in the newspapers—and I now recollect full well that mention was made of the extraordinary likeness which you were said to bear to the Royal Family. That the report was indeed true, the incident of this morning has fully proved," she added, casting down her eyes as a blush once more suffused her charming countenance: but almost instantly looking up again, she observed with a tone and manner of winning artlessness, "Sir Richard Stamford, you are a man of honour—and I need not blush like a guilty thing for an error into which I fell so innocently."

"Your Royal Highness may look upon the incident which has just passed, as if it had never occurred," said the baronet.

"Nay—it is not altogether in such a light that I wish to regard it," exclaimed the Princess: "because your conduct towards me has been too generous and too delicately attentive to permit such ingratitude as forgetfulness would be on my part. If you will become my companion to the Castle, I shall have much pleasure in presenting you to their Majesties——"

"Gracious Princess," Sir Richard Stamford hastened to observe, "you confer too much honour upon me. With delight shall I attend upon your Royal Highness to the immediate precinct of the regal dwelling; but I crave your pardon if I accompany you not beyond the threshold."

"Think you, Sir Richard Stamford, that you will be received with a cold and icy ceremony?" exclaimed the warm-hearted Princess. "No—no: I shall frankly and candidly inform my beloved father of the origin of our acquaintance—and he will thank you for your chivalrous behaviour towards his daughter. Come, Sir Richard Stamford—you shall escort me to the Castle."

And the Princess Amelia, with the most amiable cordiality of manner, but with all the maidenly dignity and graceful propriety of her rank and sex, took the arm which the baronet scarcely dared to offer her.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, as they proceeded slowly towards the Castle, "has honoured me with an invitation which under any circumstances would amount to a command, but which has been given in a tone of such kindness that it were an unpardonable rudeness and a coarse brutality on my part to offer an excuse. Nevertheless, I must incur the risk of your Royal Highness's displeasure——"

"You are incapable of deserving it, Sir Richard Stamford," hastily exclaimed the Princess Amelia. "If you do not wish to proceed beyond the threshold of the Castle, I shall give you credit for entertaining some good reason for declining my invitation—and we shall not be on less friendly terms on that account."

"Every word your Royal Highness utters lays me under a fresh obligation to you," said Sir Richard Stamford. "Permit me, then, to explain myself. My recent misfortunes have produced an effect which cannot be immediately mitigated—and never can be altogether subdued. A few weeks ago—and I was a happy husband, enjoying the blessings of a cheerful home and a wife whom I adored: now I am alone in the world—widowed in my love, and with my home a wreck! Impelled by a sense of duty towards society as well as by those feelings of vengeance which the most virtuous cannot altogether crush and annihilate at the bottom of their souls, I pursued my enemies until I sent them to the scaffold. Martin and Ramsey perished by the hand of the public executioner: but at the same moment that the drop fell, launching them into eternity—*then* also ebbed away the excitement which the proceedings taken against them had kept alive in my mind. A deep despondency supervened—and I felt that its influence was irresistible. I fled from the din of London—I sought the retirement of the environs of Windsor. Here have I dwelt for some days past—and when the weight of thought becomes intolerable, I rush out into the open air—I come hither—and in this park do I wander for hours. Sometimes I fear lest I should go mad: at others I seem to tremble upon the verge of suicide."

"Great heaven! talk not thus, Sir Richard Stamford," ejaculated the Princess, looking up into his countenance with an expression of such sympathy as a sister might evince towards a well-beloved brother; for she felt herself irresistibly drawn towards that unhappy gentleman whose misfortunes had constituted one of the most extraordinary romances in real life that ever became known to the world.

"I demand the pardon of your Royal Highness," said the baronet. "I am well aware that I ought not to intrude my sorrows upon you! But I was about to ask your Royal Highness whether it be fitting to introduce a man with such a ruined, shattered heart as mine, into the presence of your august parents? Oh! no—no: for the deeper the solitude in which I dwell—the more profound the misanthropy in which I shroud myself—the more inveterate the cynicism which henceforth shall characterise my existence——"

"Sir Richard Stamford," interrupted the Princess Amelia, speaking with a gravity which seemed singular not only for her years but likewise for the almost cherub style of beauty which marked her countenance,—"you must allow me to assume the part of a counsellor—an adviser—a friend. I will frankly inform you that when I read in the newspapers the romantic narrative of your sorrows and your wrongs, I conceived a boundless compassion for the man who had sustained such an accumulated weight of misery. Little did I imagine that I should ever encounter the hero of that mournful tragedy. But we have met—and under circumstances forming an appropriate sequence to your wild, wondrous, and touching history. For, at a moment when my own heart was swelling almost to bursting, I mistook you for that brother whose image absorbed all my thoughts—and you checked with a generous, noble, manly warning that outpouring of words which, flowing from my lips, might have conveyed revelations unfitted for any ear save that of a member of the Royal Family. This conduct on your part has made me your debtor—and has likewise augmented the interest which I already experienced in your behalf. Let me then address you as a friend; let me throw aside all affectation, and at once place myself on confidential terms with you. For although I am but a girl in years—yet in maturity of reflection and in steadiness of thought I flatter myself that I am a woman. Permit me, therefore, Sir Richard Stamford, to remind you that ideas of misanthropy and cynicism are not suitable to a man of true courage. No one has a right to withdraw himself from the world and turn hermit. If all who are unhappy were to fly into solitude, what would become of society? It would dwindle down into a waste—a wilderness—a desert. No—misanthropy is not the part which God destined human beings to play in this world. You have been sorely tried—woes of no ordinary magnitude have been heaped upon your head. The greater, then, will become the merit of patience—endurance—resignation."

"This is an angel breathing the sublimest truths in my ears!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford; and stopping short—dropping the arm of the Princess—he turned towards her, fixing his ravished, admiring, almost adoring gaze upon her countenance.

"I thank God that he has enabled my lips to utter words which have touched your heart," said the royal maiden, in a tone of the most holy and most unaffected sincerity. "Were I placed in another sphere," she continued, after a brief pause, "I should insist that you now accompanied me home—that you would suffer me to introduce you to my parents—that you would take up your abode with us for a few weeks, so that your bruised spirit might receive the anodyne which is found in cheerful society. But all this may not be," she added, laying her hand gently upon his arm and looking up mournfully into his countenance. "Nevertheless, as the daughter of your King, I have taken it upon myself to tender you my advice—to offer you the consolation which truthful doctrines may impart——"

"And you *have* consoled me, excellent-hearted Princess!" ejaculated the baronet. "Great heavens! to think that the female voice should ever again have had the power to reach a chord in my heart and make it vibrate! Methought that my soul was dead to all the tender sensibilities which woman's looks or words alone can kindle!"

"For a man to entertain such an opinion of himself, is the worst kind of scepticism, and must be offensive to his Maker," said the Princess Amelia, in a grave tone: "because it amounts to a denial of that hope which sustains us in our career, and which is an effluence from the divinity itself."

Again did Sir Richard Stamford gaze in mingled admiration and rapture upon that royal maiden whose character was so natural and without disguise,—whose manners were so impressive, and yet so winning in their almost infantile simplicity,—whose air was dignified, yet attempered by the sweetest feminine timidity,—and whose angelic countenance, though tender and languishing, was yet noble in its lineaments and characterised with an expression so purely gentle and confiding.

"Princess," said the baronet, in a voice deeply moved, "had any man prophesied to me an hour ago that it was possible for mortal tongue to pour solace into my soul, I should have shaken my head in token of incredulity: but had any one whispered in my ear that a daughter of the King would condescend even to trouble herself concerning my sorrows, I should have upbraided him with the astounding folly to which he was giving utterance. And yet, my God! both predictions, had they been made, would by this time have received their fulfilment;—and on my knees—Oh! on my knees, royal lady—must I pour forth the heartfelt gratitude which I experience for the angel-part which you have performed towards me!"

And, reckless whether there were thousands of eyes to behold the action, Sir Richard Stamford sank down at the feet of the Princess Amelia—took her hand—pressed it to his lips—and wept over it. Sweeping a half terrified glance around—then, bending her looks upon the baronet, when assured that no prying eyes beheld them—the Princess felt such strange and undefinable emotions stirring within her bosom, that she could not immediately give utterance to the words she wished to speak for the purpose of commanding him to rise from his suppliant posture. New intuitions appeared suddenly to spring up in her soul; and, when she did recover the power of language, it was in a deeply melting tone that she said, "Rise, sir—rise—you may be observed—and what will be thought of us both!"

Recalled to a sense of the inconsiderateness of that action to which however a deep and fervent sense of gratitude had impelled him,—Sir Richard Stamford sprang to his feet: then, when his eyes again met those of the Princess Amelia, he saw that she was blushing deeply. For the very words which she had last uttered had seemed inscrutably and mysteriously to link and associate themselves with the new feelings which were springing up in her bosom;

and this germinating love at first sight—for such indeed it was—produced vague alarms, soft misgivings, and tender apprehensions never known before!

"Here we must part, Sir Richard," she said, after they had walked on for a little while in profound silence.

"Part!—what—so soon?" he exclaimed: and had death been the penalty for giving utterance to those words, he would have uttered them all the same—so unwitting, so improvised, so involuntary was the ejaculation.

"Yes—I must return to his Majesty," said the Princess, now suddenly recollecting the incidents that had sent her forth from the Castle to cool her burning brow in the park—those incidents which had gradually glided out of her memory in proportion as her interview with the baronet became more tensely interesting.

"Farewell, then, generous hearted Princess!" cried Sir Richard Stamford. "No words can convey all the illimitable gratitude which I experience towards you. But let me give your Royal Highness this assurance—that henceforth, when I wish to shape in my imagination the angels that are in heaven, I shall think of you."

Thus speaking, he raised her hand to his lips—kissed it fervently—and then hurried away.

The Princess Amelia watched his retreating form for nearly a minute, at the expiration of which she turned with a profound sigh towards the nearest avenue leading to the Castle.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

CAMILLA.

IMMEDIATELY after their interview with the King, Tim Meagles and Lady Lade went back to the hotel—paid the bill—ordered the horses—and returned at a smart pace to London.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the metropolis. The Amazon then hastened to her own home, to satisfy her doting and purblind husband with some excuse to account for her absence; while her paramour repaired to Carlton House.

Meagles found the Prince of Wales alone in his own chamber, not the slightest step towards a reconciliation between himself and Mrs. Fitzherbert having been made by either party: nor indeed, after the understanding to which the heir-apparent had come with his friend and counsellor, did he for an instant desire that the quarrel should be patched up. On the contrary, he thought that it would lead all the more easily to that complete rupture which his intensely selfish nature had contemplated and which Meagles had promised to carry into effect.

In order, therefore, to avoid the possibility of meeting Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Prince of Wales had shut himself up in his own room ever since the quarrel on the night of the ball; and during this interval he had divided the time between solitary drinking and feasting his imagination with the charms of Mrs. Brace's beautiful seamstress, Camilla Morton.

The Prince was overjoyed when Meagles, on appearing before him, at once put him out of suspense by declaring that the peerage would be granted to Mr. Clarendon.

"And how the devil did you manage it, my dear Tim?" demanded his Royal Highness, chuckling heartily.

"I thought it was an agreement between us that you should ask me no questions relative to the means which I might employ," said Meagles, flinging himself upon a seat and slashing his boot with his riding-whip.

"Ah! truly—and so it was," exclaimed the heir-apparent. "Then you saw the King?"

"Yes—we had a long chat with the old gentleman," observed Meagles, speaking of his Majesty in a free and easy, off-hand kind of a fashion.

"*We!*" ejaculated the Prince. "And who the devil went with you, then?"

"The Amazon—only the Amazon," answered Tim, quite coolly.

"Nonsense! you are humbugging me!" cried the heir-apparent.

"I assure you that it is the truth," said Meagles, with a smile. "Lady Lade not only went with me—but likewise appeared before the King in her usual garb."

"And what in the name of everything sublime or ridiculous did our revered parent say?" demanded the Prince.

"Only that my wife—as his Majesty took her to be—was a monstrous fine woman," returned Meagles. "But let me tell you that without the Amazon I might not have succeeded at all. She menaced at one moment—coaxed at another—then reasoned—then pleaded—and in fine helped me considerably," he added, thus exaggerating the real truth in order to prevent the Prince from suspecting that he was in reality possessed of the Lightfoot certificate and had used it at Windsor.

"Capital!—capital!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, highly delighted at the idea of Lady Lade appearing with her huntress-garb in the presence of the ceremonious old King. "And when is this peerage to be granted?"

"In a week or ten days: and in the meantime you are to hold your tongue about it. His Majesty is going to manage it very cleverly: he means to wheedle Pitt out of it by dint of sheer artifice;—and therefore if a hint, or even the ghost of a rumour should get abroad in the interval——"

"Not a sentence shall fall from my lips, Tim, until the proper time," exclaimed the Prince. "If I hear or see anything of the Miss Clarendons, I will manage to appease them for the present somehow or another. And now that you have contrived to settle one thing for me—for I consider it to be as good as done—when shall you set about the other?"

"To-morrow, my dear Prince," replied Meagles. "At about two o'clock in the afternoon I shall make my appearance in a genteel suit of black and solicit an immediate interview with Mrs. Fitzherbert. I cannot of course say how long our parley may last: but this I promise your Royal Highness—that she will not sleep beneath your roof to-morrow night."

"Bravo, Tim!" ejaculated the Prince. "You are really an excellent fellow. By the bye, I have not found the papers, you know——"

"I dare say they will turn up some day or another," interrupted Meagles, rising from his seat. "Farewell for the present. To-morrow afternoon I shall pay my respects to your Royal Highness again—the moment I have made all necessary arrangements with Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"I shall be anxiously expecting you, Tim," said the Prince, extending his hand to his friend.

Meagles took his departure; and the heir-apparent, after cogitating for some minutes upon the successful issue of the trip to Windsor, penned a brief note to Mrs. Brace, informing her that he intended to pay her a visit in the evening and that he should pass the night at her house provided she could induce the beautiful Camilla Morton to share his couch.

Having despatched this letter to the accommodating milliner, his Royal Highness lay down upon a sofa to indulge in a doze until dinner-time. A sort of half-waking dreamy slumber came slowly upon him—and, while having his eyes shut, he pursued a continuous train of reflections,—wondering whether he should really ever wear the English crown —and if he did, how the people could be such fools as to let him—and if he did not, what it might be that would prevent him—whether a revolution at home, or the propagandism of republicanism from France. Then he thought of the numerous proofs which the history of the past and the occurrences of the present afforded of the rapid decay of monarchical institutions; and he began to calculate how long the system was likely to last in this country. Ultimately, he indulged in a tolerably hearty chuckle at the despicable folly of that long-eared jackass John Bull, who submits to be pillaged and plundered on all sides with so good a grace;—and having thus vented his mirth at the expense of those who were one day to become his subjects—or rather his slaves—he went off into a sound sleep, from which Germain awoke him at about eight o'clock.

This Leviathan of voluptuousness, profligacy, and scoundrelism, — this diabolical miscreant whose statue stands in Trafalgar Square as a flagrant insult to the People of Great Britain, and a shame and a scandal to civilisation itself,—this Prince of Wales, having dressed himself for dinner, sate down alone to the repast, and by means of the bottle whiled away

a couple of hours agreeably enough in his estimation.

He then muffled himself in his cloak—quitted Carlton House by the private staircase leading from his own bed-chamber—and passed hastily into St. James's Square. The door of that department of the milliner's establishment was speedily opened; and in a few minutes he was seated with Mrs. Brace in the little parlour to which allusion has been so frequently made in former chapters of our narrative.

To this lady the Prince speedily communicated the satisfactory intelligence that her advice had been adopted in respect to the means of propitiating Mr. Clarendon when he should come to know his daughter's shame; and the milliner was well pleased by the intelligence thus conveyed. She then spoke of the issue of the adventure at the ball, the failure of the Prince's attempt upon Lady Desborough having been already made known by him in a note which he had written to Mrs. Brace on the ensuing morning. His Royal Highness did not however at present seem in a humour to discuss that subject; but, hastily shifting the discourse, he demanded whether she had any good news for him respecting Miss Camilla Morton.

"I will tell you very candidly," answered Mrs. Brace, "that I am at a loss to comprehend this young girl. It was Sunday evening, you remember, that you supped with me, Camilla being present. All Monday I saw little of her, as I was much occupied during the day—and on the night I was at Carlton House, as you are aware. But yesterday I observed that there was some alteration in her manner. She either beheld me with an unwonted degree of timidity, or with suspicion—I know not which. I spoke kindly to her—she answered me in a tone that struck me as being cold and with an air that seemed reserved. Throughout yesterday she was thus peculiar in her manner; and to-day it has been the same," added the milliner: for it was on the Wednesday evening that the Prince and herself were thus conversing together.

"Think you, my dear Fanny," inquired his Royal Highness, "that she suspects who I am?"

"Decidedly not," responded Mrs. Brace. "If she did, she would not hesitate to tell me so—for, with all her natural timidity, she is a girl of a frank, artless, and ingenuous disposition."

"It was thus that I also read her character, on Sunday night," said the Prince. "Well, if she do not suspect who I am, what the devil misgiving can she entertain?"

"I know not. Perhaps she has overheard some incautious whisper on the part of the senior girls," added Mrs. Brace, in a musing tone. "There is one —Rachel Forrester — who will soon become a mother: and yet her position is not apparent—nor is she likely to commit any indiscretion in the presence of Camilla. In fact, I am quite bewildered what to make of the girl," exclaimed the milliner petulantly.

"Then you have not been able to arrange any plan——"

"Nothing at all," interrupted Mrs. Brace, laconically. "The truth is, my dear Prince," she observed, after a brief pause and lowering her tone, "Camilla is an orphan and totally friendless—and consequently there is not the same necessity to act in a slow, cautious, careful manner as when a young girl who has parents to fly to is concerned. Now, do you understand me?"

"I should be a perfect idiot if I did not," answered the heir-apparent. "You mean, my dear Fanny, that you leave Camilla Morton entirely to my management——"

"Yes: to your tender mercies," said the milliner, darting upon him a look full of significancy.

The Prince of Wales regarded his watch. It was close upon eleven o'clock. The young ladies had all retired to rest: but it was too early to think of putting his diabolical scheme into execution. He accordingly resolved to wait until near midnight; and Mrs. Brace covered the table with all the wines, spirits, and liqueurs that were likely to tempt the palate of his Royal Highness.

That, by the aid of curaoça punch and some delectable conversation with the handsome milliner, the Prince whiled away the time until midnight.

"Now, my dear Fanny, I shall retire—I hope to paradise," said the heir-apparent, smiling at his own awful blasphemy. "But should any accident disappoint me—any unexpected event constrain me to beat a retreat—I shall find my way to your chamber, Fanny," he added, caressing her plump cheek with his hand.

"Indeed, my good friend," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, blushing and looking confused, "I must beg and implore you to leave me unmolested under any circumstances——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince, smiling significantly; "let us hope that my success with Camilla will be such as to render it unnecessary for me to seek a bed elsewhere. But I understand you, my cunning friend—you have a little intrigue of your own in progress to-night—eh? There, now—you need not blush nor cast down your eyes: I am well aware that you are not immaculate—and indeed I have no right to question you as to your proceedings. So give me a taper and conduct me to the door of Camilla's room."

Mrs. Brace said not a word: but, with the crimson hue still upon her cheeks, she rose—lighted a wax candle—and led the way noiselessly along the passage into that division of her premises which looked upon St. James's Square: for the sleeping-rooms of the young ladies were all, for obvious reasons, in this latter compartment of the spacious establishment.

Having ascended two flights of stairs, Mrs. Brace gave the Prince the candle—whispered the number of a certain room - and then rapidly withdrew.

His Royal Highness advanced along a passage which was so thickly carpetted that even if he had trodden as heavily as a cart-horse the sounds of his steps would have been deadened by the rich fabric. In a few moments he reached the room which had been described to him; and the door yielded to his hand. But on entering a small ante-chamber, he carefully closed it again behind him.

This ante-chamber was only a few feet square—just large enough to contain a bath. Facing the entrance by which the Prince had made his way hither, was a second door; and from beneath it as well as through the key-hole glimmered a feeble light. It was evident, therefore, that a candle burnt in Camilla Morton's room; and the Prince accordingly extinguished the wax light which he carried in his hand.

He now stooped down and peeped through the key-hole.

The young girl had not retired to rest. Seated at a table, on which her elbow rested—and with her head supported languidly upon her hand—she had a book before her: but, though her eyes were fixed upon it, she evidently was not reading. Her entire attitude as well as the expression of her countenance denoted deep thought. She was plunged in a profound reverie: and the subject of her meditations was not of a joyous description—for on each pale cheek a tear glistened in the feeble rushlight.

She had not as yet made the slightest preparation for retiring to rest. Her hair was still in the graceful bands in which she wore it, and in which arrangement it set off her intellectually beautiful and sweetly pensive countenance. Her deep mourning dress displayed the dazzling fairness of her complexion to its greatest advantage, and likewise developed the perfect symmetry of her sylphide form.

For several minutes did the royal voluptuary contemplate his intended victim by means of the keyhole; and the longer he gazed upon her, the more ardently did he burn to possess her.

And that she would become his prey beyond all possibility of salvation or rescue, he did not doubt: for well aware was he that every chamber in this department of the milliner's establishment was so skilfully and artfully arranged that no screams to which the tongue might give vent in one room could be heard in another. Besides, even if it were not so, the inmates of Mrs. Brace's abode were not of a character likely to afford the succour which even the acutest lamentation or the most rending entreaties might implore.

And with truth did we observe that the reverie of Camilla Morton was far from felicitous: for she *did* entertain suspicions not only with regard to the respectability of Mrs. Brace's establishment, but likewise concerning the good faith and sincerity of the milliner herself. The incidents of the preceding Sunday evening had opened the eyes of the young girl, artless and confiding as she was. The attempt of the guest, whom she only knew as Mr. Harley, to kiss her hand had shocked her for the moment; and the indignant glance which she threw upon him expressed all the dignity of her maidenhood smarting under an insult. But on retiring to her own chamber, the suspicion already engendered in her mind kindled into the worst fears; and her sleepless pillow was moistened with the orphan's bitter weeping. No wonder was it, then, that Mrs. Brace had since observed an alteration in her manner;—and now—on this Wednesday night on which we find her plunged in deep thought at that midnight hour, and in the solitude of her own room—she is deliberating what course she ought to pursue.

Alas! alas!—now is it that the poor girl experiences all the loneliness of her position in the world. Her parents have been snatched away from her: she has not a relative, to her knowledge, upon the face of the earth. Like the keen and cutting blast of December blowing upon the naked form of the shivering mendicant, comes the piercing and icy sense of her utter isolation to the heart of the young orphan girl.

In Mrs. Brace she had hoped to find a mother. Pure, innocent, unsuspicious, and confiding, she beheld a matronly kindness in the woman's manner which speedily won her naturally warm and inexperienced heart. The rigid decorum which *outwardly* reigned amongst the young ladies led her to regard *them* with a sisterly affection. She was therefore at first completely happy—or rather as happy as a maiden who had so recently lost her parents could possibly hope to be. But suddenly the film fell from her eyes—the veil was torn rudely away—and one little incident threw all her ideas and sentiments respecting the house and its inmates into another channel. Receiving as it were new intuitions, she now recognised the impropriety of Mrs. Brace's conduct in sending her with a note to Lord Florimel: and she remembered how intently the eyes of Mr. Harley were fixed upon her at supper on the Sunday evening. In spite of her purity—in spite of her artlessness—in spite of her ignorance on many matters, the maiden had obtained a glimmering of the truth; and the exercise of her reason soon developed her comprehensive faculties to an extent sufficient to produce the conviction that the milliner meditated anything rather than a mother's part towards her.

Behold her, then, seated in the solitude of her chamber and at this midnight hour, revolving in her imagination the best means of quitting Mrs. Brace's establishment as soon as possible. She did not like to reveal with abruptness the motive which prompted her to take so decisive a step; for she thought within herself that if her suspicions should happen to be unfounded in respect to the milliner, how grieved she would be at having proclaimed them. And yet she must make up her mind speedily—it was a matter admitting not of delay—and all timidity or hesitation must be conquered in order to accomplish a duty. Camilla, then, determined to quit the house on the ensuing morning: already had she acted with weakness in remaining there three whole days after the incident of Sunday evening!

Such were the thoughts occupying her imagination, when a sound, as if the handle of the door were turning, fell upon her ears.

She started from her seat—the door opened—and Mr. Harley stood before her!

A scream burst from the maiden's lips: then, the first feeling of terror passing away in a moment, the warm blood of indignation surged up to her cheeks—her brow—her very ears!

"Adorable girl," exclaimed the Prince, extending his arms towards her,—"look not thus angrily upon me! Blame not me—blame your beauty which possesses irresistible fascinations."

The temporary courage with which anger had armed the orphan, abandoned her suddenly as these words fell upon her ears with the effect of a shock; and sinking upon a seat, she burst into tears.

"My dearest Camilla," exclaimed the Prince, closing the door behind him,—"this is but a sorry reception which you give me. Hear me, my angel—hear me declare that I adore you—that I will never cease to love you—that I will do all I can to render you happy. Come—permit me to kiss away the tears from those beauteous eyes——"

"Begone, sir!" ejaculated the maiden, a burning sense of outrage restoring to her the courage which she had lost. "Begone, sir!" she cried, starting from the chair and pointing towards the door.

"One word, Camilla—only one word!" said the Prince, quite prepared for this opposition to his desires.

"Not a syllable, sir!" was the response, delivered even in a stern tone.

"Nay—then you must hear me perforce," exclaimed his Royal Highness, leaning his back against the door.

Camilla, astonished at this hardihood—for she could scarcely have believed that any man would have been guilty of such cowardly brutality towards a defenceless female—gazed upon the Prince with a stupefaction which, coming suddenly upon her, struck her speechless and motionless.

"My dear girl," resumed the Prince, hastily taking advantage of the pause, "you must be made to understand how matters exist between us. The truth is, then, that you are ravishingly beautiful, and I am desperately enamoured of you: you are at present nothing but a poor seamstress, and I will elevate you into a fine lady: instead of plying the needle all day, you shall ride in a carriage—have servants to wait upon you—and dwell in a nice house of your own. All this will I do for you, Camilla—if you only consent to my wishes. And if not, then shall I compel your stubborn virtue to surrender: for your strength against mine will be as that of the infant child in the grasp of a giant—and to your screams no succouring voice will respond."

His Royal Highness paused in the expectation that Miss Morton would vouchsafe some reply: but though her lips were apart, yet they did not even quiver as if about to speak—a spell seemed to hold her tongue in thraldom. And, with eyes that almost glared wildly, did she continue to gaze upon the countenance of him who had thus deliberately made known to her his fiendish resolves: but her manner—her air—her looks were those of a young creature on whom a tremendous consternation has fallen, paralyzing every organ—stupefying every sense—retaining every faculty in abeyance.

Gloatingly over her slight but exquisitely modelled figure, wandered the eyes of the Prince; and although the body of her dress was so modestly fashioned, that not even a glimpse could be obtained of her bosom, yet did the shape of the closely-fitting corsage afford an external indication of the firmness and roundness of those globes which imagination could not err in depicting of snowy whiteness.

"Sweetest—dearest—loveliest girl," exclaimed the Prince, maddened with desire, as he glanced from Camilla's fascinating form to the bed which stood near,—"delay not in rendering me completely happy—and my life shall be devoted to your service!"

At that instant the girl awoke as it were from the stupefaction of a dream to complete consciousness—and with the vividness of lightning did a thought strike her.

"Mr. Harley," she said, forcing herself even to smile faintly, "you expect too easy a conquest—and you will not value it."

"Oh! this is indeed an unexpected bliss—to hear you talk thus—to find that you do not repulse me any longer!" exclaimed the Prince, intoxicated with delight. "Camilla—sweetest Camilla——"

"If you really love me, Mr. Harley," said the young girl, bending down her looks, while her cheeks became flushed with the deepest crimson,—"you will retire immediately—and to-morrow I shall be happy to listen to you——"

"No—no—we cannot separate thus, dear creature!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "I beseech you—I implore you to render me completely happy this night——"

"Leave me, then, for half-an-hour—twenty minutes—or even ten minutes," interrupted Camilla, speaking in a low tone but with rapid utterance. "Have pity upon my shame—my confusion——"

"Yes—for ten minutes will I leave you, sweetest girl," said the Prince, imagining that she did not choose to lay aside her apparel in his presence. "One kiss first—only one kiss as a foretaste of the indescribable joys——"

"No—not now—not now!" cried the orphan hysterically, as he approached her with outstretched arms. "If I must surrender myself to you, let it be in total obscurity—utter darkness——"

"It shall be as you desire," exclaimed the Prince, sweeping his eyes around the small but neatly-furnished chamber to assure himself that there was no second door by which the beauteous bird might take wing into a place of security: then, satisfied that escape was impossible and that she was completely in his power, he said, "Ten minutes only, my angel—ten minutes of mortal delay—and at the expiration of the interval, I shall return to find you ready to clasp me in your arms."

And glancing significantly towards the couch, he quitted the room, retiring into the ante-chamber.

The moment he had crossed the threshold, Camilla locked the door behind him and extinguished the light.

Then, without an instant's delay, the heroic girl noiselessly but speedily commenced the execution of the plan which had struck her as the only alternative to be adopted for the purpose of rescuing herself from the power of a man so resolutely bent upon sacrificing her to his brutal passions.

Armed with a desperate courage—that courage which could alone have prompted her pure soul to have recourse to the stratagem of appearing to yield to the villain's wishes in order to induce him to quit the room—Camilla Morton addressed herself to the task which she had in hand. Stripping the sheets from the bed, she rolled them up in a suitable manner and fastened them together; then she took the scissors which were suspended to a riband beneath her apron, and in a few minutes the bed-curtains were cut down. The window-drapery was next called into requisition; and with all these materials, Camilla speedily made a long, stout, and efficient rope.

The ten minutes had now expired—and the Prince knocked impatiently at the door. But so lightly had the young girl moved about the room—so cautiously had she conducted her operations—so skilfully had she hushed even the sounds of the scissors, that the heir-apparent entertained not the slightest suspicion of her design or the faintest idea of her proceedings. His desires—heightened by the gloating revels of his own sensual imagination—alone rendered him impatient: for he pictured to himself the sweet virgin charms, which he conceived to be by this time divested of their apparel, in readiness to be offered up as a rich banquet to his salacious appetite.

Impatiently, then, did he knock at the door; and the sweet voice of the orphan murmured from the other side, "Only another minute, Mr. Harley, and you may enter!"

The Prince was in raptures: he already felt as if

he were standing upon the threshold of paradise. But—Ah! all in a moment a sound as of a window opening met his ears. With suspended breath he listened: yes—it was a window being lifted up—and within that room too! Holy God! what did it mean? — could the young girl be meditating suicide?

Horrified by the thought, his Royal Highness burst the door open. There was no light in the room;—of *that* he was already aware, since he had vainly applied his eyes to the key-hole on quitting the chamber for the proscribed ten minutes. But the moon shone brightly into the room through the open casement.

A cry of horror burst from the lips of the Prince as the truth became suddenly revealed to him. Springing to the window, he looked forth—and his brain reeled with horror as he beheld the orphan descending from that dizzy height of two storeys into what appeared, as he glanced down, to be a dark abyss below.

A sensation of sickness seized upon him—a vertigo sprang whirlingly up in his head—he clapped his hand to his brow, and, staggering back, would have fallen on the floor had he not leant against the table which had been drawn up close to the window in order that the rope might be fastened to one of its legs.

Recovering himself almost immediately, the Prince looked forth again—and his eyes met the upturned countenance of the orphan girl as she paused to rest her light feet for a single instant on the projecting wood-work overhanging the front-door. The moon shone as though all its effulgence were poured upon the face of Camilla—that beauteous face on every lineament of which was depicted the noble heroism of a virgin resolute in saving her honour or perishing in the attempt.

"Camilla—sweet Camilla—dearest Camilla," murmured the Prince in a tone of almost anguished entreaty, as the rapid glance which he threw around the Square showed him that no one was nigh to behold this tremendous scene: "remain there, I implore you, until I come down to receive you in my arms!"

But, darting up at him a look full of indescribable contempt and scorn—for the disposition of the brave girl was too noble to harbour hatred—she once more trusted her light aerial form to the rope, and glided in safety upon the pavement of St. James's Square.

The Prince of Wales beheld the issue of the heroic deed, and then breathed more freely—for the danger that the orphan would be dashed to pieces and her death traced to his persecution of her, had suddenly passed away. Considerably relieved in one sense, but bitterly disappointed and chagrined in another, he hastily drew up the rope and closed the window: then, after a few moments' deliberation with himself whether he should arouse Mrs. Brace to acquaint her with what had occurred, or whether he should return to Carlton House and send her a note with full particulars in the morning, he decided upon the latter course. For he remembered that the amorous milliner had some little intrigue of her own in progress; and he therefore thought it better not to disturb her.

He was turning away from the chamber whence Camilla Morton had so strangely and desperately escaped, when something white upon the carpet attracted his notice; and as the object resembled a letter, he picked it up. And a letter it was—doubtless dropped accidentally by the maiden in the hurry of what may be almost literally termed her precipitate flight.

Curiosity prompted the Prince of Wales to examine the note by the light of the moon, which was shining so powerfully that it made the atmosphere resemble a halo of transparent quicksilver: but the instant that his eyes fell on the address of that letter he started as if a viper had suddenly bitten him.

The letter dropped from his hand—and this incident appeared to recall him to himself. Picking it up again, he thrust it into his breast—and then quitted the apartment with a gloom upon his countenance darker than the obscurity of the antechamber which he traversed or of the corridor into which he thence passed.

Groping his way to the staircase, the Prince of Wales lost no time in departing from a house where in addition to being thoroughly baffled by Camilla's heroic flight, he had just received a severe shock from the glimpse which he had caught of the address on the outside of the letter.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER INCIDENT OF THE SAME NIGHT.

THE reader will not require to be told that it was no ordinary amount of courage which had sustained Camilla Morton throughout the desperate proceeding which she adopted to save her honour from the libidinous profligate by whom it was menaced. But the instant she touched the pavement with her feet —the moment that her safety was assured and the tremendous gulf passed—a powerful reaction took place in her mind, and she burst into a flood of tears. Her limbs suddenly appeared to fail her—and scarcely had she dragged herself round the corner of the adjacent street leading from St. James's Square into Pall Mall, when she was compelled to lean against some railings for support.

At this moment a man and a woman passed that way: but beholding a genteelly-dressed young girl without bonnet, cloak, or scarf, and apparently convulsed with grief, they stopped and spoke to her.

"What ails you, Miss?" inquired the woman, assuming as pleasing and mild a tone of voice as possible—which was not very difficult, by the bye, inasmuch as her tones were naturally far from disagreeable.

Camilla raised her eyes the moment those words, pronounced by one of her own sex, met her ears; and, encountering the pale but rather pretty face of a young woman who looked kindly upon her, she became animated with hope and confidence.

"I have just escaped from the power of some one who menaced me with violence and outrage," she said, in a hasty and excited tone; "and I implore you to see me to a place of safety. I have but little money about me at this moment: but I possess ample means of procuring funds to-morrow——"

"Well, you take the young lady along with you," said the man; "and I'll just go about the little business I have in hand."

Camilla started at the roughness of the voice which thus sounded on her ears and which formed so disagreeable a contrast with that of the woman:

nor was she reassured when, on glancing at the man's countenance, she observed it was villanous-looking in the extreme.

The woman instantaneously perceived the effect thus produced upon the young lady, and hastened to exclaim, "My husband is a rough diamond, Miss—but he is a true one for all that. A more generous-hearted man never broke bread, I can assure you."

"And I wouldn't injure a fly, Miss," added the man, concealing behind his back the huge club which he held in one hand, and thrusting down with the other the butt-end of a pistol that peeped out of his pocket. "But I'll leave you to my missus, young lady—and she'll take as much care of you as if she was your own natural parent."

Thus speaking, the man made a sort of bow, and hurried away.

"Come, Miss—and I will take you to my lodging which isn't very far off," said the woman. "My husband is a cattle-drover, you must know, and is going to drive some beasts to Smithfield Market presently. That's why we are out so late—or rather so early in the morning. I was going with him: but now I shall have more pleasure in placing you in safety."

The woman spoke with such an air of candour, honesty, and sincerity that she succeeded in removing from Camilla's mind the disagreeable impression which the sinister countenance, rough voice, and coarse manners of her companion had made upon it: and the young lady, therefore, no longer hesitated to accompany her. But before they moved away from the spot, the woman took off her cloak and insisted that Camilla should wrap herself up in it; and as the garment had a hood to it, the maiden was thoroughly protected from the cold.

This proof of kindness won Camilla's entire confidence; and away she sped with her new friend.

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We must now return once more to the interior of Mrs. Brace's house.

It was nearly one o'clock—twenty minutes had elasped since the flight of Camilla and the departure of the Prince—and the milliner slept soundly, little dreaming what momentous incidents had taken place beneath her roof that night.

A light burnt upon the toilette-table in her bed-chamber; and the embers of a fire were smouldering in the grate.

The curtains were drawn completely round the couch, whence came the slow and steady respiration of *two* persons: for, in plain truth, the milliner was sleeping in the arms of a lover.

Who he was matters not at present.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning, we said—and a profound silence reigned throughout the establishment.

But suddenly this solemn stillness was broken by some one stumbling on the stairs; and Mrs. Brace started up in alarm. Her companion slept on, undisturbed by the sound—and she did not choose to awake him: for it struck her at the instant that the noise which had aroused her must be caused by the Prince of Wales who, in spite of the injunction she had given him, was groping his way to her chamber. Such was Mrs. Brace's impression.

She listened as she sate up in the bed—and now, distinctly as she could count the beating of her palpitating heart, did she hear footsteps stealthily approach the door.

Convinced that it was his Royal Highness who having no doubt failed in his attempt elsewhere, was resolved to share her couch,—and angry to think that she could not be allowed to enjoy her own amour in tranquility and privacy,—Mrs. Brace got up—opened the door—and immediately found herself face to face with an individual who unceremoniously advanced into the chamber.

The light from the toilette-table fell upon his countenance—and, to her unspeakable horror, she recognised the Magsman, her husband!

"Well, my love, I come to see you at all hours, you observe," he said, chucking her under the chin.

"What in the name of heaven do you want now?" demanded the wretched woman, impetuously dashing down his hand with her own. "If it be money, name the sum and the place whither it is to be sent—but leave me this moment!" she added, frightened almost to death lest her lover should awake.

"Now, don't be flurried, my love," said the Magsman, with the most provoking coolness: "for you know very well that I am of rather an obstinate disposition; and therefore the more impatient you are to get rid of me, the longer will be my visit. But I don't hesitate to set your mind at ease on one thing—which is that I'm not in any particular want of blunt at this moment."

"Then what do you require?" demanded Mrs. Brace, not daring to look towards the bed for fear the ruffian should suspect she had a companion there and should treat him with as little ceremony but in as extortionate a manner as he did the Prince of Wales on that evening when his Royal Highness was concealed behind the curtain in the milliner's parlour.

"What do I require?" repeated Joe Warren: "why—it will take me a few minutes to describe——"

"Then why not come to-morrow evening—or write to me?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, grasping at the hope that the suggestions would prove satisfactory and induce him to leave her.

"You're a fool, Fanny," returned the Magsman, laconically. "How the devil do you suppose that I can go walking about London of an evening, after escaping out of Newgate and having no end of rewards offered for my apprehension? No—no, old gal—that won't do, I can tell you. The middle of the night is the time for me—until I get a free pardon."

"A free pardon!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, who was standing all this while in her night-dress and shivering alike with cold and apprehension. "You cannot dream of such a thing! Who is to obtain a free pardon for you?"

"Yourself, my dear," responded the Magsman: "and it was to consult you thereupon that I paid you this visit to-night."

"*I* obtain you a free pardon!—consult *me!*" exclaimed the amazed and bewildered milliner; "you must either be mad or joking—and surely this is not the hour to make a jest of people."

"By Satan! it is no jest, I can tell you!" ejaculated Warren. "Come, listen attentively for a few minutes, and our business can be soon settled. I'm sorry to keep you standing in the cold, my love," added the fellow, with a leer: "but unless you like to return to your bed and admit me——

"Go on—go on," cried Mrs. Brace, petulantly: "what have you to say? I am all attention. Speak!"

"Well—you know, in the first place, that there's no end of charges against me, and ever so many rewards offered for my apprehension," resumed the Magsman; "and you have no doubt guessed before this that I had a hand in upsetting the Government van into the Devil's Punchbowl and letting loose the convicts. But it wasn't out of any love for the whole lot of them, but merely to restore my friends the Big Beggarman and Briggs to freedom. Well, such a complication of things hanging over my head, makes it unpleasant—very unpleasant, I can assure you, my dear: and my two friends that I have just named to you—one of whom, the Beggarman, had the honour of paying his respects to you at this house one night——"

"Cease this bantering tone—and speak seriously and to the point," said the milliner, sharply: and all this while she wondered how it was that her lover had not awakened—or, if he were aroused, how he could remain so silent in the presence of such a strange scene.

"I'm coming to the point as quick as I can," said the Magsman. "In fact, I was just going to tell you that my two friends, the Beggarman and Briggs, feel themselves as much put out as I do by having to play at hide-and-seek about London, and not being able to go back to our usual haunts. And then there's Lizzy Marks—my young woman, you know, who called upon you about the Newgate affair—she doesn't feel herself quite comfortable either: for the runners are looking after her as well as me and my other two pals. And therefore we have all come to a determination to get a free pardon; and if that can't be done, we shall be satisfied if the Home Secretary will withdraw the offers of reward for our capture, and just give the Bow Street functionaries a hint to look another way when they chance to see any of us coming along."

"You must be mad to think that I have the means of performing one-hundredth part of all this!" cried Mrs. Brace, who had listened with poignant impatience to her husband's explanations. "I know what you mean—I understand whose assistance you fancy that I can obtain in your behalf——"

"And by heaven! *he* shall assist!" ejaculated the Magsman, ferociously. "Come—write me a certificate, or acknowledgment, or whatever you may choose to call it, in precisely the terms which I shall dictate; and then I'll try whether I can't make his Royal Highness——"

"Hush! the very walls have ears," said the milliner, in an imploring tone. "What do you require me to write?"

"An acknowledgment that you are the Prince's mistress," answered the Magsman.

"Silence! — begone!" almost screamed the wretched woman, driven to despair.

"Damnation! do you dare me outright?" exclaimed the Magsman, in a ferocious tone: then, drawing a pistol from his pocket, he said, "By Satan! you shall do as I command you—or——"

"Mercy! mercy!" moaned the milliner, falling upon her knees and clasping her hands with an air of passionate entreaty.

"Don't be a fool and no harm will happen to you," said the Magsman. "I don't want your life—it's no use to me: but I will have what I ask for—a written acknowledgment that you've been unfaithful to me, your lawful husband—and that his Royal Highness——"

"Be silent, I command—I implore—I beseech you!" cried Mrs. Brace, in a tone of stifling agony.

"Then give me the paper—get up from your knees and write it at once——"

"No—never—never!" exclaimed the milliner. "You are mad to ask it—you must kill me first——"

"By Satan! I will too," interrupted the Magsman ferociously, as he presented the pistol at his wife.

A shriek burst from the lips of the affrighted woman: but at the same instant—quick as the eye can wink—a man sprang from behind the curtain of the bed—dashed the pistol from the ruffian's hand—and, bounding past him towards the toilette-table, extinguished the light.

All this was the work of a moment, and the room was suddenly involved in total darkness. Indeed, with such rapidity was the whole proceeding accomplished that the Magsman did not even catch the faintest glimpse of the countenance of the individual who had so abruptly and unexpectedly emerged from the bed.

Fortunately the pistol did not explode—or serious injury, if not death, might have been the result.

"Villain! attempt no violence—or, by heaven! it shall be a struggle of life and death between us," exclaimed a firm, decided, and manly voice the instant that darkness fell upon the scene.

With a savage growl the Magsman stooped to pick up his pistol: but it was snatched away from him at the very moment that his hand touched it—Mrs. Brace's unknown lover having simultaneously sought for the weapon. A terrible imprecation burst from the lips of Joe Warren, as through the intense darkness he aimed a blow with his bludgeon which would have told with murderous effect had it reached him for whom it was intended. But the unknown had already stepped aside—the next instant the Magsman was tripped up—and Mrs. Brace, throwing up the window, was on the point of screaming for assistance, when the villain, seeing that his position had suddenly become alarming, exclaimed, "Silence, Fanny! don't raise the neighbourhood, and I'll take myself off at once."

"Begone, then!" said the unknown individual, releasing the ruffian from the strong grasp which he had laid upon him the moment that he had tripped him up.

The Magsman rose and beat a hasty retreat without uttering another word: not that he was afraid to struggle with his unknown and unseen foe even unto the very death,—but because he was well aware that if a disturbance were created in the house, it would probably end in his arrest—and he had presence of mind enough to recollect that although he had escaped once out of Newgate, he could not hope to perform the same feat a second time.

"Get you back to bed, Fanny," said the unknown; "while I just slip on some clothing and assure myself that the fellow leaves the house."

"For God's sake, beware of him, my lord," murmured the milliner: "or he will do your lordship a mischief."

"Fear nothing," was the response: and the nobleman—for such he was—stole from the room.

And now a most extraordinary incident crowned

the adventure which we are relating. For the nobleman, gliding hastily down the stairs in the pitchy darkness which prevailed, overtook the Magsman near the bottom; and laying his hand upon the villain's shoulder, he said, in a low but impressive whisper, "One word with you, my friend!"

"Well—what now?" demanded the Magsman, in a voice scarcely even as agreeable as the growl of a tiger roused from its nap by the stick of the menagerie-keeper. "If you mean mischief——"

"I mean nothing of the kind," was the curt and decisive interruption. "On the contrary, you are just the very sort of man for whom I have been seeking these months past—and I am delighted that accident should have thrown such a desperate fellow as you are in my way."

"Then why did you interfere with me up-stairs?" demanded the Magsman gruffly, and more than half-inclined to immolate—or attempt the immolation of—the unknown with his club.

"Because," replied the nobleman unhesitatingly, "in the first place it was necessary, to protect a female from violence—even though that female be, as I understand from what passed, your own lawful wife: secondly, because it was equally necessary to prevent you from creating a disturbance calculated to alarm the household and expose the fact of *my* presence in Mrs. Brace's bed-room;—and thirdly, because I can put you in the way of earning a sum of money which shall be ample enough to render you independent for the rest of your days in a foreign land."

"This last reason is one which I understand best of all," said the Magsman. "But are you in earnest?—or do you meditate some plant to entrap me?"

"Fool!" ejaculated the nobleman, contemptuously: "do you take me for a Bow Street runner?"

"I don't know what the devil to take you for," rejoined the Magsman.

"Nor do I intend to enlighten you," said the nobleman. "But although you could not see me in the bed-room just now, I had a good view of your precious countenance from behind the curtain—and if I were an artist, I could paint it from memory to-morrow, to the very life."

"You're complimentary, at any rate," observed Warren, laconically. "But about this business you hinted at——"

"We cannot discuss it now: nor must your wife up-stairs—no, nor a living soul, save with my consent, become cognizant of what may pass between you and me on another occasion. You know the road in Hyde Park that runs along the border of Kensington Gardens?"

"I do. What next?" demanded the Magsman.

"Amuse yourself with a stroll up and down that road next Sunday evening, from nine to ten o'clock," said the nobleman; "mind and be alone. You will then know more."

"I shall not fail you," answered Warren: "for this looks like business."

"It will prove a lucrative one to you, my good friend," responded the nobleman. "But you must now be off as quickly as possible—and I shall see you as far as the front door."

The Magsman moved on in obedience to this hint; and fruitlessly did he strain his eyes to penetrate the darkness and catch a glimpse of the unknown's countenance. The obscurity was impervious; and on groping their way into the shop, the nobleman threw a silk handkerchief over his head so that when the door should be opened, the rays of the moon might not stream upon his features.

This precaution therefore baffled the last chance which the Magsman had of obtaining some idea of the personal appearance of the singular individual who from having been a resolute foe promised to become a generous patron.

"Good night," said Warren, as he crossed the threshold into Pall Mall: "or rather good morning."

"Here—take your pistol," whispered the nobleman, placing the weapon in his hand.

The Magsman muttered a word of thanks—thrust the pistol into his pocket—and took his departure at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THE ORPHAN.

We have already, in a previous chapter of this narrative, glanced at the maze of vile and crowded streets lying in the immediate vicinity of Westminster Abbey: and it was into this morass of brick and mortar, swarming with human reptiles, that Camilla was led by the woman who had manifested so much apparent interest in her behalf.

During the walk from the vicinage of St. James's Square, Camilla had ingenuously and frankly confided to the woman enough of her history to show that she was an orphan—that she had a few hundred pounds standing in her own name at the Bank of England—and that she had been compelled, even at so late an hour in the night, to flee precipitately from an establishment in which she had been engaged but where she had suddenly encountered treatment of the most dishonourable kind. She did not however mention the name of Mrs. Brace—nor did she explain the manner in which she had escaped from her house: a lingering sentiment of delicacy and forbearance rendered her silent on the former point—and she imagined that she should not be believed were she to enter into details respecting the latter.

The woman expressed the deepest sympathy on Camilla's behalf—declaring that it was fortunate the young lady had fallen in with her, as she would take the greatest care of her until she had decided what course to adopt—and concluding with a strong eulogy on her husband whom she represented to be "the most kind-hearted of men, although his occupation of a drover had somewhat marred his good looks by exposing him to all weathers and leaving him little leisure to attend to his personal appearance."

In fact, the woman spoke with an air of so much sincerity that Camilla not only placed implicit confidence in her, but was even angry with herself for having allowed the sinister countenance of her husband to produce a disagreeable impression on her mind or excite a momentary suspicion.

Nevertheless, when the woman led the way into that maze of sombre-looking streets, the sudden plunge as it were from the glorious moonlight into the obscurity of narrow lanes and the positive darkness of vile alleys, produced the effect of a shock upon the young girl; and, catching her companion by the arm, she said in a tremulous tone, "Whither are we going?"

"To my lodgings, which are close by," was the answer, delivered in so calm and collected a voice and with such a reassuring manner that Camilla felt ashamed of her terror. "Poor people, my dear young lady, are obliged to dwell in strange-looking neighbourhoods," added the woman.

"Alas! that is too true," murmured the orphan, as she continued her way by her companion's side.

In a few minutes the woman stopped in one of the sombre streets—opened a door with a latch-key—and said, "This is my abode, Miss: it is humble—but you are welcome."

Camilla's heart sank within her at the appearance of the place; and yet the woman's words and manner were kind, honest, and reassuring. Overcoming her scruples, therefore, by a desperate effort, and exerting all her power to stifle the suspicions that again sprang up in her bosom, the young lady crossed the threshold—plunging as it were into the most pitchy darkness.

The woman shut the door, and requested Camilla to wait one moment in the passage while she entered an adjacent room to procure a light. The half minute which now elapsed seemed to the maiden a perfect age; and her apprehensions increased to such an extent and with such rapidity that they rose into ideas of horror developing themselves in ghastly numbers But suddenly a light gleamed forth from the open door of the room—the woman re-appeared, with a candle in her hand—and the look which Camilla threw upon her encountered so much placidity of expression on her pale and interesting features, that again were her fears dissipated in an instant, and again was she bitterly vexed with herself for entertaining suspicions which were most probably injurious in the extreme to the female who was affording her a generous hospitality.

The candle revealed a small narrow passage with dingy walls and a staircase at the extremity; and up this flight the woman led the way, Camilla now following her with renewed confidence. A small but

cleanly bed-chamber on the first floor received them; and the woman intimated that it was here the young lady was to sleep. She again apologised for the humility of the accommodation, but again likewise affirmed an assurance of the most cordial welcome. Camilla expressed her thanks for the kindness demonstrated towards her—and the woman, placing the candle upon a little table, withdrew.

Carefully locking the door, the orphan hastened to lay aside her clothing—for she was overwhelmed with fatigue; and soon after she had laid her head upon the pillow slumber sealed her eyes.

She awoke in the morning just as the clock of Westminster Abbey was striking nine; and when the sunbeams shone upon her eyes and she found herself safe in that homely room but cleanly bed, she again reproached herself for having thought ill of the couple to whom she was indebted for the hospitality she had enjoyed.

Rising from the humble pallet, Camilla performed her toilette: but, during the operation, tears more than once trickled down her cheeks as she thought of the really comfortable home from which she had been compelled to fly, and of the necessity of finding another.

Another home! Alas — alas! 'tis much more easily said than done: and the orphan felt that it was so—and her heart, as it were, came up into her throat as she reflected that the *only true home* which she had ever enjoyed had been swallowed up in the grave of her parents!

O God! robbery is bad—forgery is vile—rape is atrocious—and murder is abhorrent: but to ill-treat the orphan—to be merciless towards the poor being from whom Death has borne away the fond mother and doting father, never to send them back again,—Oh! this is abhorrent also—and the wretch who has no pity for the orphan, is capable of robbery, and forgery, and rape, and murder!

Scarcely was Camilla's toilette performed, when some one tapped gently at the door. She opened it — and the woman made her appearance with many anxious inquiries as to how the young lady had slept. This apparently kind solicitude on her behalf having been duly acknowledged by Camilla, the woman led the way to a small but neatly furnished parlour down stairs, where breakfast was ready arranged upon the table.

The woman's husband was there, and his appearance had undergone considerable improvement. For he had shaven the beard of several days' growth which enhanced the sinister expression of his countenance when Camilla first beheld him a few hours back—his hair, then matted, was now combed out and neatly arranged—his soiled shirt had been exchanged for clean linen—and he wore a decent suit of black clothes.

"I hope my missus has made you comfortable, young lady?" said the man, assuming as gentle a tone as his voice could possibly modulate itself to.

"I have to return you both my sincerest thanks for your kindness," answered Camilla.

"Oh! don't say a word about that, Miss," exclaimed the man. "We only performed a Christian duty; and I'm sure that even a heart of stone would have melted to see such a nice young lady as you are in any sort of trouble and distress. Why, when I returned home about an hour after you and my missus, I found her a-crying as if her eyes had turned into water-spouts——"

"Well, well," interrupted the woman—but not petulantly;—"I must confess that I was affected by all the dear young lady had been telling me as we walked along. For it's such a shocking thing to have lost one's parents at so tender an age—— But come, dear Miss," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself—for she saw that Camilla had become painfully affected: "dry your tears—don't take on so, there's a sweet girl—and anything that me or my husband can do to assist you, we will perform cheerfully. Come—sit down—and try a cup of tea: it will do you good, Miss."

Camilla hastily wiped her eyes, and, yielding to the woman's entreaties, took a seat at the table. Her heart was however too full to allow her to experience the slightest appetite: but she forced herself to eat a mouthful for fear her entertainers should think that she was dainty and disliked the homely fare set before her. When the meal was over, the man rose from his seat, observing that he had some particular business to transact in the City, but that he should be back by dinner-time.

"The City!" exclaimed his wife. "Are you going into the City the first thing this morning? Well, that *is* singular——"

"Singular, my dear—how so?" demanded the man, who spoke in very affectionate terms to his wife.

"Because this young lady has some little business to transact in the City, I think. Didn't you say so, Miss?" inquired the woman, turning towards Camilla.

"I must indeed replenish my purse," responded the orphan, with a profound sigh,—"since I have been compelled to leave my situation. Having lost one home, the sooner I settle myself in another the better."

"Then I suppose, Miss, that you've got relations, or trustees, or lawyers, or something of the sort in the City," said the man; "and you want to call upon them. In that case, I shall be very happy to see you safe to their house," he added, with an apparent frankness which quite made the orphan forget the sinister expression of his countenance.

"Alas! I have no relatives—no friends," she returned, hastily wiping away the tears that started forth upon her long lashes. "But, Oh!—I was wrong to say that I had no friends!" she exclaimed, a sudden reminiscence striking her and bringing a tint of animation to her pale cheeks. "Yes — Mr. Meagles—he will advise me how to act——"

"You'd better write a note to your friend, Miss," said the man, exchanging a rapid but significant glance with the woman: "and I will take it to him at once for you. It 'll be much better than for you to go running about the streets——"

"Thank you—thank you!" exclaimed Camilla, grateful for the suggestion and the offer which accompanied it. "But it is not necessary for me to write—indeed, my brain is so bewildered that my very sight is dazzled—and I could not pen a single line. My object will be however accomplished if you will have the goodness to call on Mr. Meagles in Jermyn Street;"—and she mentioned the number of Mrs. Piggleberry's house. "You can tell him that incidents of a most unpleasant nature have occurred, compelling me to leave the establishment in which I held a situation—and that if he will favour me with an immediate visit, his advice will be most thankfully received."

"Your commission, Miss, shall be executed without a moment's unnecessary delay," responded the man, who immediately quitted the house.

Ten minutes elapsed before it struck Camilla that she had forgotten to communicate her name to the individual who had thus undertaken to convey her message to Meagles; and she almost felt surprised and annoyed that the man himself had not asked the question. She however consoled herself with the reflection that Meagles would be certain to guess who it was that thus sent for him—and if not, the description which the messenger would give of her personal appearance could not fail to recall her to his recollection.

At the expiration of an hour the man returned, wearing a mournful expression of countenance; and Camilla instantly perceived that something was wrong.

"Mr. Meagles isn't at home, Miss," he said; "and I regret to inform you that he won't return for the next six weeks. He's gone to Scotland, it appears, on very particular business — for the Prince of Wales, I think the woman of the house told me——"

"Yes—most probably," murmured poor Camilla, in a stifling tone: "I know that he *is* very frequently employed in transacting the business of his Royal Highness."

"Well, cheer up, Miss—don't take on about it," said the man. "You're quite welcome to stay here, you know, till your friend returns: and as for money—I'm sure neither me or my missus will ever ask you for a farthing——"

"The young lady is not without funds," observed the woman, as if giving a piece of information to her husband.

"Oh! well—I'm glad of that for her sake, poor dear!" exclaimed the latter. "But how could I know it unless you told me, my love?" he added, in a tone of bland and gentle remonstrance to his wife.

"My good friends," suddenly exclaimed Camilla, after a few moments' deep thought; "my mind is made up how to act. It is true that I possess a few hundreds of pounds in the Bank of England, which sum I had hoped to leave there to accumulate while I subsisted by the earnings of my needle. I am determined not to seek for another situation: but I will hire and furnish a neat lodging in a respectable neighbourhood and endeavour to form a connexion as a dress-maker. For this purpose I propose to repair to the City—inquire for some respectable solicitor or stock-broker——"

"If you want a lawyer, Miss," interrupted the woman, "my husband's attorney is one in whom you can place implicit trust. Ah! we were better off ourselves once, Miss, I can assure you—and then we had our regular professional adviser, who has stuck like a friend to us ever since."

"He has indeed!" ejaculated the man. "There isn't a better fellow in the world than Samuel Simmonds, Esquire—though I say it. And what is more extraordinary still, I've got an appointment with him this forenoon——"

"I shall be thankful," said Camilla, "if you will allow me to accompany you to Mr. Simmonds' office."

"Well—I have got to call at several places first," remarked the man: "but my missus shall go with you into the City presently—and I'll meet you both in Tokenhouse Yard at twelve o'clock precisely."

With this understanding, to which the orphan thankfully assented, he took his departure.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE ORPHAN'S FRIENDS.

Precisely as the clock of the Royal Exchange was striking mid-day, Camilla Morton and the woman alighted from a hackney-coach in Lothbury, whence they passed into Tokenhouse Yard, which is a blind alley the houses whereof are chiefly let out as offices and business-premises.

With the little money which Camilla had in her possession when she fled from Mrs. Brace's house on the preceding night, she had purchased a bonnet and scarf; and the excitement of having her mind now actively employed had brought back the colour to her cheeks. Her appearance was therefore ladylike, pleasing, and interesting—and, as the woman kept close behind her, it seemed as if a genteel young person was walking out attended by her servant.

Scarcely had they entered Tokenhouse Yard when the woman exclaimed, "How fortunate! Here comes my husband with the lawyer!"

And Camilla, raising her eyes, beheld the man advancing in company with a short, stout, red-faced, but respectable-looking individual, dressed in black, and who was immediately introduced to Miss Morton as Mr. Samuel Simmonds.

"Highly honoured to make your acquaintance, Miss," said the attorney. "What can I do for you in the way of business? But had we not better walk back to my offices?" he demanded, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the farther extremity of Tokenhouse Yard.

"I don't think it's necessary, sir," suggested the man. "This young lady only wants to sell out a few pounds——"

"Indeed! Oh! well—it happens that I am just going over to the Bank to meet my broker, who is to sell out twenty thousand for a certain noble lord—my best client in fact," observed Mr. Samuel Simmonds, assuming a confidential tone and air, as if he would not tell everybody that the nameless peer was his most generous patron. "Well, Miss—and how much do you propose to sell out?—and what's the stock? Be so kind as to tell me all about it, Miss—and your business shall be done in a jiffey—ahem! I mean in a moment."

Camilla, taking the abruptness of the lawyer's manner for the off-handedness of business, drew from the bosom of her dress a Bank receipt; and presenting it to the attorney, she said, "This will give you all the necessary explanations, sir: and I am desirous to sell out a hundred pounds."

"Very well, Miss—a hundred pounds," repeated Mr. Samuel Simmonds. "Just be so kind as to step over to the Bank with me. Oh! you may come too—both of you, if you like," he added, turning with a patronising smile to the man and his wife.

The whole party accordingly crossed over the street to the Bank, and entered that court-yard which communicates with Lothbury.

"Stop here one moment, Miss—stop here with the young lady, my good friends," said Mr. Samuel

Simmonds, in his off-hand, bustling, business-like style. "I must just step in and see whether my broker is there yet: or else," he observed, with a knowing wink, "non-professionals, you perceive, will not be allowed to enter this atmosphere which is redolent of cash."

And laughing heartily at some wit which he probably saw in the observation, Mr. Samuel Simmonds walked rapidly away—entering the building by a door at the extremity of the court, and carrying the Bank receipt in his hand with an air of as much indifference to its value as if it were a piece of waste paper as utterly worthless, for instance, as the leaf of the *Morning Post* that contains the leading articles.

"Clever fellow, that—very clever fellow!" observed the man, ostensibly addressing himself to his wife, but really for the purpose of impressing the idea which he enunciated on the mind of Miss Morton.

A feeling of uneasiness shot like a pang through the brain of the young lady when she beheld the lawyer depart in such an unceremonious manner with the document which constituted her title to the few hundred pounds that she had in the funds: but scarcely had she begun to reason within herself against the justice of her suspicion, when Mr. Simmonds re-appeared, holding the Bank receipt in his hand with the same air as before—as if it were a matter of perfect indifference whether he or his client kept it until it was wanted.

"My broker isn't come yet—and it's just as well that he should not have been here at the moment," said Mr. Samuel Simmonds, as he accosted the party. "The fact is, I find there's a new regulation issued since yesterday—and people selling out stock must be identified *to* the broker *at* his office first. So I tell you what must be done:—you, my good fellow," he continued, addressing himself to the man, "go with the young lady to my broker's—you know where he lives in Cateaton Street—and having identified her, make him come along with you at once. Tell him I'm waiting here about his lordship's twenty thousand pound affair as well as the young lady's business. Miss," he added, turning to Camilla,—"will you have the goodness to step as far as Cateaton Street with our good friend here?—and then the matter can be settled in a moment."

Camilla unhesitatingly complied with this request; and away she went in company with the man whose sinister countenance she had completely forgotten—so grateful did she feel towards him for all the trouble himself and his wife were taking in her behalf.

On emerging from the Bank of England, however, Camilla observed that her companion drew his hat, which had large slouching brims, very far over his countenance, and pulled the great shawl-handkerchief which he wore very high up; and as the weather was not particularly cold, the proceeding actually assumed in her eyes the appearance of a wish on the man's part to conceal his features. Again did suspicion shoot like a pang through the brain of the orphan; and the feeling was sympathetically felt like an ice-bolt in her heart. She cast another and more scrutinizing look upon his countenance: but all she could see of it were the eyes that gleamed with a sinister glare, and the nose peering over the shawl-handkerchief. Thus was he muffled up—and yet it was little more than noon—in the broad daylight—and with a crisp and healthy but by no means chilling atmosphere.

What could it mean? Had she fallen into vile hands?—should she rush back to the Bank of England where she had left the woman and the lawyer, and demand her receipt, or at least assure herself that it was all safe? Her blood literally curdled in her veins and she appeared to be walking on under the influence of a vertigo as she asked herself these questions. Still she obeyed not the suggestive impulse which her suspicions gave; and although every instant beheld those suspicions growing more poignant and intolerable, she had not the moral courage nor the resolution to turn abruptly and retrace her way to the Bank of England, because by so doing she should at once be letting the man see that she mistrusted him, his wife, and his attorney altogether. And then, if her suspicions *did* happen to be wrong, how sorry—how grieved—how distressed should she be to think that she had thus injuriously treated persons at whose hands she had received so much kindness!

While these conflicting thoughts, ideas, and inclinations swayed her mind, she still kept walking on by the side of the man; and at length, unable any longer to endure a state of suspense and uncertainty which became excruciating, she said, "I beg your pardon for putting such a question—but are you confident that Mr. Simmonds is completely trustworthy?"

"Trustyworthy!" ejaculated the man, speaking from behind the great shawl-handkerchief: "to be sure he is, Miss—or you don't suppose that I would have recommended him to you? Bless your heart alive, he's honesty itself!"

They were now in Cateaton Street, which is a very narrow thoroughfare; and at this moment a waggon so completely blocked up the way that there was only room for one person to pass at a time. The man allowed Camilla to proceed first; and the young lady went quickly on, in the hope of speedily reaching the stockbroker's office.

The waggon was cleared—and, turning round, she looked for her companion. But he was not to be seen! Her suspicions now became maddening, and she hurriedly retraced her way along the street. Still she could see nothing of him. With wild and affrighted looks, the orphan increased her pace, and in a few minutes arrived once more at the Bank of England.

Entering the court opening from Lothbury, a glance convinced her that the woman and the attorney had disappeared likewise. A sickening sensation came over the poor girl—her brain reeled—her eyes grew dim—her limbs gave way beneath her. But by a sudden and violent effort, she recalled her scattered ideas; and remembering that the lawyer's offices were represented to be situate in Tokenhouse Yard, she hastened thither with a speed which was now animated by despair. On every door and on the wall inside every passage opening from that blind alley, did she search for the name of Simmonds: but she found it not. At length, when the last house in the place was vainly inspected, the orphan staggered against a door-post and pressed her hand to her forehead in order to steady her brain—for she felt as if she were going mad!

But once more did she arouse herself from the influence of despair in order to woo back hope to her

bosom: for, Oh! to lose all that she possessed in the world was a blow which seemed of an atrocity too infernal for a good God to permit to fall upon the head of an orphan,—a blow which would strike her as with blasting, searing lightning, leaving naught save the blackest misery in her soul!

Holding her hand in momentary consideration to her heated, throbbing brow, she reflected that she might have misunderstood Mr. Simmonds—that his offices were not in Tokenhouse Yard—that he was perhaps still waiting for her, but in some other part of the Bank of England—and that an accident had separated her from the man who was leading her to the broker's place of business. These thoughts, rapidly suggesting themselves, appeared so feasible that she even endeavoured to smile at her own silliness in giving way to such harrowing suspicions: but, alas! the smile was sickly indeed, and the suspicions were relieved of little of their agonising poignancy.

Hastening back to the Bank of England, Camilla accosted the beadle who stood at the gate, and inquired whether he happened to be acquainted with an attorney of the name of Simmonds.

"I should rayther think you don't want to ax me such a question, young o'oman," was the gruff response which the lace-bedizened functionary gave, as he raised his staff slowly and let it fall suddenly with the butt-end on the pavement.

"You surely cannot understand my question," said Camilla, the tears starting into her eyes: "or you would at least answer me with the same civility that I exhibited towards you when putting it," she added, in a tone that trembled with emotions.

"All I know is that I see you and another o'oman pass the gate just now in company with that notorious feller Simmonds and a suspicious-looking man—and I kept a precious sharp eye on all four on yer," said the beadle. "So you'd better be off—'cos we don't want pickpockets and prostitutes lurking about here —— But, holloa! what's the matter now?" he ejaculated, perceiving that Camilla suddenly burst into a perfect agony of weeping. "Come—tramp—be off with you!" he cried in a brutal tone and with savage manner. "This is a new dodge, I suppose—and you fancy that whimpering vill make genelmen pull out their purses and empty 'em into yer hand. Come—be off, I say."

And, seizing the wretched girl by the shoulders as she was leaning against the open door to support herself from falling, the beadle bundled her roughly into the street.

Three or four persons instantly stopped to witness the proceeding; and Camilla, overwhelmed with mingled shame and grief, fruitlessly endeavoured to utter a few words of explanation. The beadle made a sign that she was an impostress—the persons whom the scene had attracted, shook their heads and passed on, wondering how so young a creature could practise so much deception — and the Bank functionary of course obtained the credit of being a very vigilant and experienced officer who could detect a rogue or cheat under any disguise.

And the orphan dragged herself away from the spot, ten thousand times more poignantly wounded by the insult she had received than by the loss of all she possessed in the world: for that Simmonds was a notorious character was at least apparent from the words which had fallen from the beadle's lips.

For a few minutes the mental anguish which Camilla endured was so excruciating that it absorbed every other consideration; but suddenly recollecting that she was in a public place in the middle of a crowded city, and perceiving that her woe-begone aspect was attracting towards her the notice of every one who passed, she dried her eyes—drew her veil over her countenance—and walked mechanically on, without however heeding which way she was going. In this mood the poor creature made the complete circuit of the Bank; and she only became aware of the fact when suddenly startled by finding herself once more within a few yards of the beadle who had ere now so grossly ill-treated her.

Retaining her veil over her countenance, and summoning all her courage to her aid, she accosted the man who evidently did not recognise her again at the moment.

"Not many minutes have elapsed," she said, in a tone the collected firmness of which surprised even herself, "since you cruelly misjudged the character of a respectable young lady, to whom you likewise offered personal violence."

"Ah! and you're the young lady?" ejaculated the beadle, suddenly becoming alarmed lest he had indeed gone too far—for there was now something in her voice and manner which carried a conviction to the man's heart that she was *not* the loose and abandoned character he had so gratuitously represented her to be.

"Yes—I am the young lady," said Camilla: "and if you yourself are a father or a brother—if you have a sister or a grown-up daughter whom you love and respect—you ought to feel both sorry and ashamed that you have this day so grossly and unprovokedly insulted me."

The beadle now grew more frightened and began to stammer forth apologies—declaring that there were so many impostors now-a-days it was impossible to know who was honest and who was not—that the Bank especially was made the scene and the theatre of their pranks—and that he was obliged to be very particular or else he should lose his situation.

"All this is doubtless true enough," said Camilla; "but you ought to exercise greater caution. However, I freely forgive you for the ill-treatment which I experienced at your hands. And now tell me what you know of those people with whom you saw me ere now?"

"Respecting the young o'oman and the man with the shawl-handkerchief, I don't know nothink, Miss," answered the beadle, whose tone and manner had changed from the surly roughness of the bully to the cringing servility of a coward who is afraid of the consequences of his ruffianism: "leastways, I could only judge by their looks that they was rum customers. But that scoundrel Simmonds is always lurking about here ——"

"Then he is not an attorney, as he pretends?" said Camilla, her heart sinking within her and all the keen, agonising consciousness of utter misery again coming upon her, as the last lingering gleam of hope was now unmistakably destroyed.

"Well—he was a lawyer once, Miss," answered the beadle: "but he's been struck off the rolls long ago—and ever sinoe he's hung about the Bank and 'Change——"

"Which is the way into the public room where persons sell money out of the funds?" demanded Camilla, in a stifling voice.

"Through that door, Miss," responded the func-

tionary, pointing with his staff in the direction indicated by his words.

Away sped the orphan into the establishment; and addressing herself to one of the numerous clerks whom she saw in the room that she thus entered, she put a few inquiries in a rapid and almost incoherent manner—for she was convulsed with an inward grief to which she dared not give vent, but which it cost her the most painful efforts to control. By the individual whom she thus accosted, Camilla was referred to another clerk; and from the lips of this latter official she learned that certain stock standing in a certain name had been sold out within the last half-hour. The book was shown her—her name, as it appeared in the Bank certificate, had been signed by the female who personated her—and that female could have been none other than the treacherous woman who had treated her with such a show of hospitality and friendship.

For a few moments a palsy of the heart and brain seized upon the wretched girl—and a mortal shivering assailed her. Her limbs gave way beneath her—and she clung to the counter for support.

"A forgery has been committed, then?" said the clerk: and the words, which he repeated for the third time, fell upon her ears and recalled her to her senses.

"A forgery—yes—and I am ruined!" she gasped painfully: then, as a sudden idea struck her, she fled precipitately from the room.

But the clerk hurried after her—and, overtaking the wretched girl as she was speeding through the courtyard, he said, "I beg your pardon, Miss—but so serious an affair must be looked into immediately."

"I am going somewhere for that purpose," replied the orphan, in a rapid and excited tone.

"You will return, then—you will assist the officers of justice, if necessary, in adopting the proper proceedings——"

"Yes—yes—I will return," exclaimed Camilla, the dread of seeing a last hope destroyed now rendering her even angrily impatient and petulant.

And, breaking abruptly away from the clerk, she sped forth from the Bank of England.

A hackney-coach was passing at the time: she stopped it—entered the vehicle—and ordered the driver to take her to Westminster and set her down in the immediate vicinity of the Abbey.

The ride, instead of serving as an interval for her to regain her composure, only tended to increase the excitement under which she laboured. For her impatience became agonizing: she longed to repair to the house where she had slept, in the hope of encountering the woman, and either by threats or entreaties inducing her to surrender a part, if not the whole, of the amount which she had received at the Bank. But the coach was drawn by two miserable hacks which crept along at a snail's pace; and, to add to her vexation, Cheapside was thronged with vehicles. Thus was her progress impeded—and all the while her own ideas travelled with the speed of lightning. For she fancied that the man and woman who, under the guise of friendship, had so scandalously plundered her, would have time to return to their abode, pack up their things, and decamp ere she could possibly reach the place. Her impatience therefore grew maddening: and on reaching the Abbey she was in such a state of exhaustion, through the intense workings of her feelings, that she could not immediately alight from the vehicle.

Three times did the coachman inform her, as he stood holding the door wide open, that she had reached her destination,—three times before she could rightly understand him. Then—suddenly reanimated with courage, strength, and energy—she sprang forth and was darting away, when the driver demanded his fare. Her reply was that she should return in a few moments: but her wild and excited manner rendered him suspicious—and he insisted upon being paid at once. Though burning with anxiety to rush onward, Camilla was compelled to yield; and the liquidation of the coachman's claim exhausted the contents of her purse. She was now penniless!

But not pausing to reflect upon this circumstance, nor even heeding the driver's question whether he was to wait for her, the almost maddened girl plunged into that maze of streets in which she knew the house where she had slept was situated. To find this dwelling was not however so easy a task as she had at first anticipated. For the streets in low, obscure and vile neighbourhoods are so much alike—and squalor, vice, and misery assimilate all things which come within their fatal scope. Thus, having chased frantically up and down in that labyrinth of poor habitations, Camilla was compelled to relax her pace; and it was when, completely exhausted, she was dragging herself painfully along, scrutinizing every door and every house-front, that she lighted on the abode which she sought.

A gleam of joy flashed through the black and cheerless void into which the wretchedness of a few hours had changed her heart; and she knocked hastily at the door.

The summons was obeyed by a hideous-looking man on whose bald head an excrescence or wen protruded with a disgusting effect, and on every lineament of whose countenance crime was stamped indelibly.

"Are the people of the house at home?" inquired Camilla timidly—for her heart again sank completely within her at the appearance of so repulsive an individual.

"Who dy'e mean?" demanded the fellow, with a tone and manner that were not only brutal but even menacing.

"I mean the man and his wife who gave me a lodging here last night," responded the young girl: "I do not know their names——"

"Lord bless ye!" ejaculated the repulsive individual: "you'll never hear of them no more. They're gone for good, young Miss, I can tell you."

And with these words, which sounded the knell of the orphan's last hope, the fellow banged the door violently in her face.

She turned away—that poor friendless girl—as if she had just heard her death-sentence pronounced. Her countenance was so ghastly pale it seemed as if the blood could almost be perceived in the blue veins: her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth—her throat was as dry as if she had swallowed ashes. Great God! what was to become of her?—whither was she to go?—where seek an asylum? Not at Mrs. Brace's fashionable establishment which the vices of the aristocratic and the profligacy of the great and titled had converted into a luxurious brothel discreetly conducted,—oh! no—not for worlds would she return thither! Death—death—aye, even death by starvation—death in the open

street, on the cold pavement,—yes—such a death were preferable to the loss of her honour!

Alas! alas: poor orphan girl, deeply—deeply do we sympathise with thee—boundless is our compassion, O persecuted virgin!

But whither does she now fly so quickly?—what new idea has seized upon her imagination?—what sudden impulse is she obeying thus precipitately? She remembers that there is such a person in the world as Meagles—she is hastening to Jermyn Street to ascertain whether it be really true that he has undertaken a journey to Scotland. For this purpose is she speeding on so frantically again—'tis her only hope—and her ardent longing to find it realized, lends wings to her feet.

But a sudden vertigo seizes upon her—she stops short—her brain reels—she staggers forward a few paces, extending her arms as if to implore assistance—then sinks upon a door-step in that vile neighbourhood near the Abbey.

A moan of indescribable anguish escapes her lips—and her senses abandon her!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

MRS. FITZHERBERT AND TIM MEAGLES.

In the splendidly-furnished drawing-room belonging to her own suite of apartments at Carlton House, Mrs. Fitzherbert was seated alone, in a pensive mood, upon a sofa placed near the fire which burnt in the grate as if with a cheerfulness that mocked her mournful aspect.

Not only was she indignant and offended on account of the scene which had occurred on the night of the ball: but there was likewise a presentiment of approaching evil weighing heavily upon her heart. For though this was by no means the only quarrel which she had ever experienced with the Prince of Wales, it was nevertheless the first that had lasted so long and that had led to no attempt at reconciliation on his part.

What could this perseverance in maintaining a state of enmity mean?—what did it signify? Had her charms lost their spells—her witcheries their power—her manners their fascination? Or was his Royal Highness in reality so deeply attached to Lady Desborough that he not only pined on account of the disappointment he had experienced, but likewise cherished an unforgiving rancour against her who had thus interposed between himself and the intended victim of his lust?

The untoward incident had taken place on Monday night: it was now Thursday afternoon—and the Prince had not even sent to inquire concerning her health. Two mortal days had thus passed—a third was drawing to its close—and not a word nor a line from him who before God was her husband, though the detestable laws made by man forbade the connexion. At first the lady's indignation and resentment sustained on her own side a feeling which would have made her decline any answer to a verbal message and send back a written one unopened: then, as her more angry sentiments gave way to the fondness which she really experienced for the Prince, her pride prompted her to shroud herself in a reserve as gloomy as that in which he had shut himself up;—and thus from neither side had emanated the least overture towards a reconciliation. Though living beneath the same roof, this husband and wife had not seen each other for three whole days!

Now therefore the lady's pride was more than ever wounded; and indignation was again asserting its empire in her breast. How haughty was now that curl on her exquisitely chiselled lip!—how menacing was the light which shone in her large blue eyes!—how nervously did her taper fingers play with the long, pale, glossy tresses which flowed down upon her plump shoulders of dazzling whiteness and the bosom of such luxurious proportions!

Should she await the royal pleasure of her husband to make up their serious differences?—or should she pen a line conveying the first overture to him?

These were the questions which she asked herself in a moment of milder mood: and she was deliberating the points within her own breast, when a servant threw open the door of the apartment, announcing Mr. Meagles.

A glow of triumph and the animation of joy lighted up the splendid features of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she rose to receive the guest: for it instantly struck her that he was come as a messenger of peace from his Royal Highness.

Meagles, who was attired in a suit of black, but whose coat nevertheless had a certain sporting cut about it, endeavoured to assume a demureness of countenance which he deemed suitable to the task which he had taken in hand: and indeed, he did feel dissatisfied and low-spirited concerning it—for, much as he really disliked Mrs. Fitzherbert, he could not resist the painful reflection, now when matters were coming to a point, that it was a woman against whom he was about to wage war. Even at the last moment would he have gladly retreated from any farther interference in the business: but interest—self-interest—egotism,—*these* prevailed with a man who was far from being deficient in qualities naturally generous and traits unquestionably amiable.

With a greater courtesy than she had ever before manifested towards him, did Mrs. Fitzherbert proffer her hand to Mr. Meagles and request him to be seated: then, with the tact of that good breeding which affected to see in him only an ordinary visitor and not a messenger sent on a special errand, she began to converse on the current topics of the day with as much graceful ease and unpretending fluency as if she had naught weighing on her mind.

Meagles was far more embarrassed than he thought he should be. Mrs. Fitzherbert's cordiality of manner disarmed him of the rancour which he had cherished against her; and her extreme beauty touched his heart, enlisting his sympathies in spite of himself. He adored the fair sex—and it struck him as being something criminal to plunge into the deepest woe the superb creature whose eyes were now beaming kindly and whose lips were smiling upon him.

But he thought of the dukedom which he hoped to gain eventually—and once more did egotism triumph!

Averting his head partially, so that the lady's artillery of charms and fascinations should not play with such powerful effect upon his looks, he availed himself of a momentary pause in the discourse to observe, "Madam—your Royal Highness—I know not exactly which to call you——"

"Ah! then at all events you are no stranger to the secret of my marriage with the Prince of Wales?"

interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a smile that displayed the brilliant teeth between the parting coral of the lips.

"His Royal Highness keeps few secrets from me, madam," said Meagles, catching a glimpse of the handsome countenance as it appeared handsomer than ever when the light of so sweet a smile played upon it: then, again averting his eyes, he added, "Yes, madam—I am aware that the marriage ceremony was celebrated between yourself and his Royal Highness——"

"And I presume and hope that the Prince speaks of it with respect?" exclaimed the lady, suddenly alarmed by the peculiarity which was apparent in the tone and manner of Tim Meagles as he made the observation which she thus interrupted.

"Oh! his Royal Highness entertains the utmost respect towards you, madam," responded Meagles, not daring to look at her as he thus spoke; "and whatever may happen, he will ever adopt measures to ensure your happiness and prosperity."

"Whatever may happen!" repeated Mrs. Fitzherbert, with increasing alarm--a terror that she vainly endeavoured to conceal; for it was apparent in the half-excited, half-tremulous tone in which she gave utterance to those words.

"And I am sure, madam," continued Meagles, "that no one can regret more deeply—more profoundly—more bitterly than his Royal Highness, the necessity which compels him to yield obedience to his august father's will——"

"I begin to understand you, sir," murmured the lady, in a faint voice: then subduing her emotions with a great though painful effort, she said, "Tell me candidly, Mr. Meagles—has the Prince sent you to me on this occasion?"

And she laid her hand gently on his arm as she spoke—as if appealing in a friendly spirit to his honour and his generosity to treat her with frankness and candour.

"It is by the desire of his Royal Highness that I have sought this interview," replied Meagles, who was compelled to look Mrs. Fitzherbert in the face as he thus answered her query: and the anxiety which he saw depicted there, in spite of her strenuous endeavours to veil her feelings, did him harm.

"You are a messenger from his Royal Highness,—and the bearer of evil tidings, Mr. Meagles," said the lady, after a few moments' pause. "But tell me all that the Prince has commanded you to communicate—keep me not in suspense, Mr. Meagles, I implore you."

"Madam," resumed the individual thus energetically appealed to, "I beseech you to prepare yourself to hear intelligence which will no doubt distress you. But the Prince relies upon that attachment which you experience for him—that love which you bear him——"

"Then assuredly the tidings which you are about to impart, are more serious than I could have possibly anticipated," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her courage and presence of mind rapidly oozing away; "for it is evident that the Prince has well instructed you how to gild your prefatory words and administer a little honey to mitigate the after bitterness of a vast amount of gall. Oh! Mr. Meagles, if you have any compassion for me, you will at once and without farther delay tell me what his Royal Highness proposes—wishes—or commands."

"The Prince is forced, madam," replied Meagles, "to give his assent to this alliance which has been planned for him——"

"With Caroline of Brunswick!" ejaculated the lady, a visible trembling passing over her magnificent form: and, while the blood rushed to her countenance, dyeing her cheeks with a crimson hue that made them appear in strong contrast with the pale colour of her shining hair, she bit her lip convulsively in order to restrain an outburst of those feelings which suddenly began to boil within her.

"Yes—with Caroline of Brunswick, madam," repeated Meagles. "No one is better acquainted than yourself with the peculiar position in which the Prince of Wales is placed. His debts are enormous—and the only way of inducing the House of Commons, servile and grovelling as it is towards the Royal Family, to vote the funds to liquidate those liabilities, is by offering the marriage of his Royal Highness as a guarantee for his future steadiness."

"His Royal Highness *is* married, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, rising from her seat and drawing herself up so proudly and with an air of such queenly hauteur that Meagles was for a few minutes completely overawed. "Yes," continued the lady, in a tone well suited to the feminine dignity of her manner and the loftiness of her bearing,—"the Prince of Wales is married—and I am his wife! I know it may be objected that there is in existence a certain law entitled the Royal Marriage Act, which was passed twenty-three years ago, and in contravention of which I have become the wife of his Royal Highness. I am aware, therefore, that the detestable technicalities of law courts may pronounce our alliance illegal—and a vile statute may be made to triumph even over the ordinances of God. But such a monstrous proceeding shall not be allowed to take its course without resistance—aye, a bitter resistance on my part. For marriage is a tie which cannot be trifled with—unless indeed Parliaments shall at once proclaim themselves an authority superior to God and God's ordinances, and declare that they are justified in repealing all the beneficent provisions of the Christian Church in order to suit the whims and pander to the caprices of Royalty. No, Mr. Meagles—the Prince shall not divorce me thus! I love him enough to die for him—but not sufficiently to permit myself to be made the sport of his pleasure and the victim of his convenience: for death were preferable to such an insult!"

And having thus spoken, Mrs. Fitzherbert sank down exhausted upon her seat.

"Madam," said Meagles, in a deep and solemn tone,—"I have listened to you with the utmost attention—and I perfectly agree with you in all the opinions which you have enunciated. For I admit the infamy, the scandal, and the atrocity of the Royal Marriage Act, which suspends in respect to a single family those laws which apply to the millions forming the rest of the community. But allow me to remind you that the English Monarchy is in reality as despotic and as absolute as that of Russia—with only this exception, that whereas the Russian Sovereign promulgates his will all at once in the shape of an ukase, the English Sovereign establishes his tyranny through the medium of a servile Parliament. Nevertheless, madam, it is as easy for the King of England as for the Emperor of Russia to perpetrate a foul wrong—the way in which it is done is alone different."

"And what would you have me infer from all

this, Mr. Meagles?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a cold tone: for her excitement had subsided into a glacial aspect of stern determination.

"I would have you understand, madam, that it is utterly useless for you to oppose the will of the British Sovereign," responded Meagles. "He is resolved that the heir-apparent shall marry the Princess of Brunswick—and this self-same heir-apparent dares not disobey him. Under these circumstances, madam, it will be worse than useless for you to throw any objection in the way: for the King's fiat has gone forth—and the Prince has made up his mind to yield with as good a grace as he can well assume."

"And I am to be sacrificed, Mr. Meagles?" said the lady, in a tone so cold and passionless that it seemed as if a marble statue were speaking—and as a marble statue, too, was she now pale, and motionless, and still, all save those white lips between which her words came slowly and freezingly.

"Madam—you will not, I hope, indulge in harsh terms," exclaimed Meagles: "for all the severity of expression which the English language is capable of conveying, will not amend the position of affairs. But if you compel me to unfold the truth in all its naked plainness, I must candidly and frankly inform you that King George III would not only sacrifice one poor weak woman, but would see a hundred thousand beautiful female hearts bursting and breaking ere he would yield a single tittle of his purpose. This is the solemn fact, madam—and with pain and grief is it that I give you so hopeless an assurance. But remember—as yet the King is unacquainted with the fact, that a marriage ceremony was ever performed between yourself and his son——"

"Our interview need not be prolonged, Mr. Meagles," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, slowly rising from her seat.

"It cannot be concluded, madam, until something definite be settled," he answered, not rudely but firmly.

"Am I to understand that you await a reply from my lips, in order to convey it to his Royal Highness?" demanded the lady, fixing her eyes keenly upon his countenance.

"Madam, the affair is no longer in the hands of the Prince of Wales," said Meagles, solemnly and impressively.

"Then, in whose charge is it?" asked Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"In mine!" rejoined Meagles.

"Ah!" ejaculated the lady, a flush re-appearing on her cheeks and dying away again as suddenly: "then I am to understand that I behold in you an enemy?"

"God forbid that you should force me into an act of hostility!" exclaimed Meagles.

"Nevertheless, your words prove that, under particular circumstances, you are prepared to act on the offensive," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her eyelids, her lips, and her bosom now evincing a nervous trepidation which showed that her glacial sternness of purpose was changing into excitement and agitation once more.

"To put as speedy an end as possible to this most painful interview," observed Meagles, "permit me to inform you that you must expect to behold his Royal Highness no more—otherwise than as a friend."

"And if I resist this cruel decision—if I proclaim open hostility to this tyrannous conduct—if I assert my rights——" gasped the unhappy lady, throwing a look of mingled entreaty, apprehension, and suspense on Meagles as he stood before her with half-averted countenance.

"O madam!" he exclaimed, in a tone which showed that his heart was not callous to all the pathos of this singular but touching scene: "compel me not to give utterance to menaces—force me not to speak in an unmanly way towards you——"

"Nay—I will not be thus easily crushed—thus readily subdued!" ejaculated the lady, in a moment recovering her presence of mind and the energy of her character. "I know that you are capable of anything desperate, Mr. Meagles—but I defy your threats!"

"And yet you must suspect, madam," he said, in a tone full of meaning, "that I am acquainted with a secret concerning yourself—a secret involving your honour, madam——Ah! that tell-tale blush shows that I am not misunderstood——"

"But the Marquis de Bellois would not be villain enough to proclaim in his sober moments what he has doubtless boasted of to you, sir, in his wine-cups," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, the colour coming and going with rapid alternations upon her countenance, and her whole frame trembling with concentrated rage.

"I require not the Marquis de Bellois' words to corroborate the tale which it is in my power to tell," said Tim Meagles, forcing himself thus to give utterance to threats of which he was profoundly ashamed.

"Ah! then you fancy that the honour of a woman can be sullied beyond all redemption by the mere fact of your breathing upon it?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of the bitterest scorn.

"Madam, you do wrong to provoke me," answered Meagles: "but the sooner you understand me fully, the better. Know, then, that you *must* yield to circumstances——"

"Begone, sir!—begone!" cried the lady, interrupting Meagles with sovereign imperiousness, and pointing towards the door.

"One word, madam—one word——"

"Not a syllable—unless it be to demand my pardon for an insolence which has already lasted much too long. Begone!" repeated the indignant lady: "or I will order my valets to thrust you ignominiously forth into the street!"

"Then learn the truth at last, madam!" cried Meagles, his face becoming purple: and drawing forth a packet of papers he held it significantly up before her eyes.

One glance—one single glance was sufficient to convince the startled and wretched lady that the damning proofs of her amour with the Marquis de Bellois were in the hands of her enemies—and, reeling half round, she sank heavily, like a dead weight, upon a sofa.

Still she retained her senses—Oh! retained them most keenly, most acutely: for it appeared as if lightnings had suddenly blasted all her hopes—as if the powers of hell clasped her limbs;—and, a cold perspiration breaking out all over her, she was drenched in her own excruciating agony.

"Madam, pardon me—in the name of God! pardon me, for doing all this," exclaimed Meagles, terrified by the appearance of the unhappy lady: "but I am the creature of circumstances——"

"No, sir—no—the creature of your own diabolical selfishness!" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a rending tone. "You are persecuting me that you may gain a reward: but sooner or later heaven will punish you for the part you have this day taken against me. Tell me, however—tell me," she said, her manner suddenly becoming subdued and her voice sinking, —"does *he*—the Prince—does he know that you possess those papers——"

"As God is a witness to my words, the secret itself—*your* secret—is unknown and unsuspected by his Royal Highness," exclaimed Meagles.

"And it will remain so, provided that I obey the conditions which you dictate?" she demanded, in a hoarse thick tone: then, without waiting for a reply, she added, "Had I been left to contend only with the Prince, whom I still look upon and claim as a husband, I would not have yielded—Oh! no—never, never! Nor should all the power which the King might exercise, when informed of the position wherein I stand with regard to his son, have induced me to disavow my marriage or place a seal on my lips respecting it. To the nation would I have appealed—to the country would I have addressed myself. But since *you*, sir, have declared yourself the Prince's champion in the perpetration of this tremendous wrong, I am forced to submit: for I know," she exclaimed, her eyes glaring wildly — even savagely upon him,—"I know that you would not scruple to coerce me by the means which a villain's treachery has placed in your hands. And now, sir," she demanded, after a few instants' pause,—"what are your orders?"

"The conditions I propose, madam, are that you leave Carlton House as soon as convenient," said Meagles, not daring to look her in the face; "and I will guarantee that a handsome provision shall be made for you by his Royal Highness."

"Not a shilling, sir—not a single shilling!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, summoning all the dignity and hauteur of her character to her aid: for unless she were thus sustained in a condition of unnatural

calmness, she felt that her heart would burst. "And now, sir," she said, in a tone which was so cold and with a manner which was so glacial that it froze the blood in Meagles' veins,—"you may return to your royal master, the Prince of Wales. Tell him that you have done his behest—that you have succeeded in inducing me to say farewell for ever to this abode in which I have passed *some* happy hours—and that I do not seek even a moment's interview with him ere I cross this threshold, never to return. Go, sir—and in less than an hour Mrs. Fitzherbert will be no longer an inmate of Carlton House."

Thus speaking, she waved her hand imperiously—and Meagles retired with precipitation from the presence of a woman against whom he had suffered himself to be made the instrument of so diabolical a persecution.

Repairing straight to the private apartment in which the Prince of Wales was so anxiously expecting him, Meagles flung himself upon a seat—and, though he uttered not a word, his manner indicated that a very painful scene had taken place, but that it had ended agreeably to the wishes of the heir-apparent.

"I can read success in your countenance, Tim," said his Royal Highness: "but why are you also so infernally mournful?"

"Because I have this day played a part of which I am ashamed," was the emphatic response. "And yet there was no help for it—the step was rendered imperiously necessary by a variety of circumstances——"

"To be sure—to be sure!" ejaculated the Prince, interrupting his friend who was falling into a musing humour: "there was no help for it! But what has been done?—will she go?—how have you managed?—does she want to see me?"

"Do you wish to see *her?*" demanded Meagles, almost savagely.

"Not I—no—I would rather not," returned the Prince, fearful that a last interview had been promised. "You do not mean to say that there is to be any leave-taking——"

"None — none!" cried Meagles, emphatically. "She will depart within an hour—unless indeed her heart should break——"

"Is it possible that she can be so powerfully affected?" exclaimed the heir-apparent, feeling a momentary sorrow stealing over him: but instantaneously recovering his hardihood, he said, "Well, Tim, you have indeed performed prodigies! Yesterday with my father—to-day with Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"And now, if you wish to testify your gratitude," interrupted Meagles, "you will at once cease from talking on the latter subject. I tell you that I am displeased with myself—and I feel cold all over as if with remorse. Let us change the conversation, then. Come—have you naught to communicate to me—no new amour——"

"By the bye," ejaculated the Prince of Wales, a sudden thought striking him,—"I have indeed something to speak to you about. You remember that money-lending fellow, Foster——"

"Who blew his brains out?" cried Meagles, darting a bitterly reproachful glance at his royal companion.

"The same," returned the latter coolly, and not noticing the peculiarity of Meagles' look at the moment. "Well—did you not know that this same man possessed a daughter—a very beautiful girl——"

"And how came *you* to know it?" demanded Meagles, turning sharply round towards the Prince.

"Egad! I never knew it at all till last night," continued his Royal Highness. "Only conceive the romance of the narrative I am about to unfold to your ears. Mrs. Brace—the dear, delectable, accommodating Mrs. Brace—received within her establishment a certain Camilla Morton—a sweet creature, attired in deep mourning for the recent loss of both her parents. As a matter of course I determined to possess the charming Camilla——"

"Well—go on—go on!" exclaimed Meagles, scarcely able to restrain the mingled impatience and indignation which now animated him. "You determined to possess the charming Camilla, you say—and Mrs. Brace doubtless aided you——"

"To be sure: she is devoted to me," returned the Prince. "Accordingly, last night I supped with the excellent milliner—and at the proper time I repaired to the young lady's chamber——"

"What! without any previous understanding, agreement, or appointment?" exclaimed Meagles. "Upon my word, you carry your love-conquests by storm," he added, concealing with a forced laugh the bitter vexation which he in reality experienced.

"By Jove! there was no conquest in this instance—but a signal defeat," cried the Prince.

"Ha! ha! let us hear all about it," said Meagles, his laugh now suddenly becoming hearty indeed.

"The tale is told in five words," continued his Royal Highness. "Miss Camilla Morton was sitting up, although it was past midnight—and she had not made the least preparation for retiring to rest. The fact is, she was in a pensive mood, and was giving way to mournful reflections. This much I ascertained by peeping through the key-hole of her door; and, unable to restrain my impatience, I burst in upon her reverie. After a short colloquy she appeared to consent to my views and wishes: but it was only a trick on her part to get me out of the room, under the pretence that she could not lay aside her clothing before me. And I was fool enough to believe her——"

"Fool indeed!" ejaculated Tim, with another merry laugh—for he now quite enjoyed the Prince's narrative. "What happened next?"

"Why—the cunning, daring, adventurous puss tied the sheets, blankets, and drapery together," continued his Royal Highness; "and she lowered herself from a second-floor window down to the pavement of St. James's Square."

"Merciful God!" exclaimed Meagles, terrified by the bare idea of this appalling feat: "what—without experiencing the slightest injury? Impossible!"

"It is so possible, my dear fellow," returned the Prince, "that I saw it all with my own eyes. And now for the sequel. Prior to trusting herself to the rope, she had most likely intended to secure about her person any papers of consequence which she possessed—for the contents of her work-box and drawers were all thrown confusedly out in different directions: and in her hurry she doubtless dropped a letter upon the floor. At all events, I picked one up: and behold! it was directed to *Miss Rose Foster*, and addressed to the very house in the Edgeware Road where my money-lending Foster used to dwell. The truth flashed to my mind in a moment!

Camilla Morton was in mourning for the recent loss of both her parents—the name must be an assumed one—and she could be none other than the daughter of those Fosters who perished so lamentably! Such was the conviction which burst upon me; and I candidly confess that I was staggered for the instant. Something like a remorse sprang up in my breast——"

"Aye — likely enough," interrupted Meagles: "for you must confess that it would not have been an agreeable sequence to the tragedy of the parents had you persecuted the orphan daughter to death."

"Are you in earnest, Tim — speaking so seriously?" cried the heir-apparent, in amazement at this display of softness and emotion on his friend's part.

"Perhaps I may be," responded Meagles, drily. "But the young lady got clear off, I suppose?"

"Oh! in perfect safety," rejoined the Prince. "The letter which thus made known to me who she really is, was only an epistle from some school-acquaintance, written several months ago. And now I will tell you what I want you to do, my dear fellow."

"What?" demanded Meagles.

"To make inquiries who the girl's relatives and friends are," returned his Royal Highness; "and endeavour to trace her out. I am determined that she shall not escape me thus——"

At this moment Germain entered the room.

"What do you want?" demanded the Prince, annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of his observations.

"I am ordered to announce to your Royal Highness that Mrs. Fitzherbert has taken her departure from Carlton House:"—and having delivered this message, the valet bowed and withdrew.

"Now, thank God! I am unshackled once more," exclaimed the Prince, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"But only for a short time," answered Meagles, rising from his seat. "In a few months you will have to lead the Princess Caroline of Brunswick to the altar."

"And the idea of that marriage weighs upon my soul like a presentiment of evil," rejoined the heir-apparent, a deep gloom suddenly spreading itself over his countenance.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE BARGAIN OF CRIME.

It was between nine and ten o'clock on the Sunday evening following the incidents just related—and although dark clouds were piled upon the face of heaven, yet were they so broken that the moon shone brightly forth from amidst them, silvering the edges of their sombre masses.

The Magsman, with his club under his arm, and his hands in his pockets, prowled up and down the road on the western extremity of Hyde Park; and every time he passed a particular clump of trees, he muttered in a low hoarse tone, "No one's made their appearance yet, old feller."

"They'll come, I daresay," was the responsive growl that came from behind the huge trunks of the leafless trees.

Then no more was said—and the Magsman resumed his walk, which the coldness of the night however accelerated into a short trot.

Presently he beheld some one approaching; and in a few minutes a man of middle-height, enveloped in a capacious cloak, and having a black mask over all the upper part of his countenance, accosted the Magsman.

"You are punctual," said the stranger: and Warren instantly recognised the voice of the individual whom he had encountered at Mrs. Brace's abode and by whom the present appointment was made.

"I've been a-waiting for you this last half-hour," responded the Magsman; "and therefore I'm more than punctual. But what's the business about?"

"I presume you are not over particular what you do to earn money?" said the stranger, interrogatively; and the Magsman could distinguish two dark eyes gleaming intently upon him through the holes in the mask.

"As little particular as a man can be in these hard times," was the response that he gave.

"You have your price for every species of crime which can be suggested to you?" continued the unknown querist.

"There's nothing you can name that I won't do," answered the Magsman,—"provided the reward is a fat one. Now do you comprehend me, sir? For I suppose you want to be assured as to the lengths which I'm prepared to go, before you open your mind to me," added the ruffian.

"You have accurately divined my intention," responded the stranger: then, sinking his voice to the lowest audible whisper, he said, "And murder has its price as well as aught beside?"

"To be sure," exclaimed the Magsman. "For instance, if I thought you was putting a plant upon me now, I'd shoot you through the head as unceremoniously as I'd eat my dinner;"—and the moonbeams glanced on the barrel of a pistol which he drew from his pocket.

"Put up your weapon, my good fellow," said the nobleman—for such, as the reader will remember, he was—although the Magsman was not aware of the circumstance: "we shall do some business together, instead of quarrelling, ere we part."

"So much the better. But I thought it as well just to let you see that I don't stand the slightest nonsense," observed the Magsman. "And now proceed with any more questions you may wish to put to me."

"From what took place between yourself and your wife the other night," resumed the stranger, "it is clear that you incur constant dangers by remaining in this country. Now, if you had your purse well filled, would you not like to try your fortunes on the other side of the Atlantic?"

"In America," ejaculated the Magsman: and he was about to give a decisive negative, accompanied with the remark that there was no place like London for a man *of his profession*, when suddenly checking himself, he substituted an affirmative answer—observing, "Yes—if it was made worth my while, I shouldn't at all mind visiting them free States which have thrown off the yoke of old George III. But if a murder is to be committed," he continued with a coolness which made the nobleman shudder, though he himself had suggested that such a crime was in contemplation,—"it surely

isn't necessary to go all the way to America to cut a chap's throat."

"Not at all," was the immediate answer. "But it suits my purpose that when the business which I have in hand shall be completed, those whom I may have engaged to carry it into execution shall be shipped without delay for America. If this proposal meets your views, well and good: if not, we may go our ways at once and no harm is done."

"Anything suits my book," said the Magsman, "as long as there's blunt forthcoming and plenty of it."

"I think, then, that we shall agree very shortly," observed the unknown. "Have you a faithful friend whom you can trust—a man like yourself——"

"As like me in villany as two peas," interrupted the Magsman: "but I should say he was a trifle uglier in the face."

"And he would consent not only to bear his part *in any crime*," continued the nobleman,—"but likewise to bid farewell to his native land for ever, and settle in America with the fruits of this service which I require?"

"I can answer for him as easily as for myself," replied Warren.

"Five thousand pounds, then, are the price which I offer for the deed that is to be done," said the stranger.

"'Tis a grand sum—two thousand five hundred a-piece," observed the Magsman. "But how is it to be paid?—all in a lump?"

"Decidedly not," was the emphatic answer:—"or else what guarantee have I that you will embark for America when once the money is in your pocket? These are the terms I propose:—"Five hundred pounds a-piece, for you and your friend, the moment we reach the place where the deed *is to be accomplished.* Five hundred pounds more for each, so soon as the deed *shall have been accomplished.* The remaining fifteen hundred pounds a-piece to be paid when you stand on the deck of the vessel at Liverpool."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the Magsman. "These are terms which don't require much consideration. And now, when is the affair to be carried into execution?"

"To-night, if you can procure the aid of your friend at once," answered the nobleman: "and if not, to-morrow night at latest.'

"As for my friend," said Joe Warren,—"I could get him with us in a brace of shakes: but the notice for to-night is so precious short—and we've both got friends to take leave of—besides, I've a young woman I should like to take out with me—and my pal has got a daughter that he'd wish to say good-bye to——"

"You could both write to your friends from Liverpool," interrupted the nobleman; "and the young woman you speak of might follow you in the very next ship. Therefore, if you can possibly make arrangements for to-night, I shall be well pleased—inasmuch as *my* preparations are all in readiness."

"It shall be as you wish," said the Magsman. "And in the same way as you made preparation in the belief that the thing would come off to-night, so did I take a similar precaution in the expectation that there was business in hand which might probably give employment to *two.* Now then, Price—old feller—come along!" he exclaimed, bawling out loud.

"All right!" ejaculated a voice from a short distance; and at the same moment the Big Beggarman emerged from behind an adjacent knot of trees.

"I also am provided with weapons, understand," exclaimed the nobleman, in an impressive tone to Joe Warren; "and I hesitate not to punish treachery."

Thus speaking he thrust forth his arms from beneath his cloak—and each hand grasped a pistol, the click of which as he cocked them fell sharply on the Magsman's ears.

"Lord bless ye, sir," ejaculated the latter; "me and my pal are as harmless as doves towards our patrons. Only, to tell you the truth, I didn't know but what some plant might be meant against *me*, in which case I had the Big Beggarman—for that's his name—close handy to assist. And it's lucky that I took such a precaution, since you want your business to come off to-night and it requires two to do it."

"Very lucky," observed the nobleman laconically, as he concealed his weapons beneath his cloak. "But I leave you to explain matters to your companion."

Thus speaking, he walked a little way aside—keeping a sharp eye, however, through his mask upon the two villains, who were soon in earnest conversation together. Their discourse did not however last long: for at the expiration of a few minutes, the Magsman accosted the nobleman, saying, "I knew it would be all right—and I told you so. My pal is perfectly agreeable, and accepts the conditions which you've proposed. In fact, he's quite ready to cut as many throats from ear to ear as you may want us to try our hands upon."

"Follow me, then!" exclaimed the nobleman, a cold shudder passing over his form as this terrible language fell upon his ears.

The party proceeded at a rapid pace until they reached the Tyburn Road on the northern boundary of Hyde Park; and beneath the shade of the trees over-hanging the wall of Kensington Gardens, a private carriage drawn by two horses was waiting. The lamps of the vehicle were not lighted—the blinds were drawn up—and no servant was in attendance save the postilion, who wore a drab great-coat and a shawl handkerchief coming up to his nose.

This individual opened the door in silence the moment he beheld his master approaching in company with the two men; and the three got into the carriage, one corner of which was already occupied by a female. The nobleman placed himself next to her: the Magsman and the Big Beggarman took their seat opposite, which was the one nearest to the horses;—and the postilion closed the door upon the party. In another moment the vehicle sped rapidly away down the road.

Complete darkness reigned inside, all the blinds being carefully drawn up. A long silence likewise prevailed, but this was presently interrupted by the nobleman offering the two ruffians refreshments, with which, it appeared, the pockets of the carriage were well supplied. Substantial sandwiches and flasks of brandy were presented to them; and in spite of the intense obscurity, neither the Mags-

man nor the Big Beggarman failed to find the way to their mouths.

The nobleman and the lady—for such she was—now began to converse together in the French language, although they were both English: but their knowledge of the continental tongue enabled them to exchange observations without being understood by their two companions, who continued to eat and drink in silence.

In due time the vehicle stopped to change horses. The blinds were not disturbed—the halt was short—and away sped the carriage again. The Magsman and the Beggarman, having by this time finished their sandwiches and emptied their flasks, snoozed off each into a comfortable nap which lasted until the horses were changed again. Then, the relay being effected, they fell asleep once more; and thus, what with waking up at intervals and relapsing into slumber again, they whiled away several hours—the journey continuing the whole time.

At length the carriage halted altogether, and the lady let down the blind on one side while the nobleman did the same on the other.

The grey dawn of morning rendered all things visible, but with a misty appearance; and the first impulse of the Magsman and the Beggarman was to cast their eyes upon the lady. But their survey of her was by no means comprehensive: for like her male companion, she was wrapt in an ample cloak, and wore a mask concealing all the upper part of her countenance. Her hair was so arranged that but little of it was visible beneath her slouching gipsy bonnet: nevertheless two or three straggling curls had fallen during the night—and these were of a dark glossy brown. The eyes that looked forth from behind the mask, appeared of a deep blue—and the chin, which was completely visible, was sweetly rounded and dazzlingly fair. In fine, there was every indication, despite the disguise, that the lady was young—and even the coarse imaginations of the Beggarman and Joe Warren believed her to be beautiful.

From the lady their eyes were cast from the windows of the vehicle; and they found that the halt had taken place in a bye-lane leading through a woody tract of country. At a distance of about a quarter of a mile, a small farm-house reared its white walls and its heavy gables, picturesque even in the winter-time;—and on an eminence, apparently a couple of miles farther on in the same direction, a spacious mansion seemed to command a view of the entire district.

These were the only habitations visible: but at a short distance ahead some kind of building was evidently in progress—for the poles of a scaffolding, the triangularly arranged props sustaining a huge stone, and unfinished walls of masonry met the eyes of the Magsman and the Beggarman as they leant from the windows, sweeping the whole country round with their keen, searching looks.

But where they were—in what county, or in what part of England—they knew no more than the dead.

The postilion opened the door of the carriage: the nobleman immediately leapt out—assisted the lady to alight—and then bade the Magsman and the Big Beggarman follow.

Giving his arm to the lady, he led the way down the lane, towards the building which was in the course of being raised, and which proved, on a nearer view, to be a bridge partially erected and intended to span a stream of about thirty yards wide.

CHAPTER XC.

THE CRIME ACCOMPLISHED.

THE reader must now be made to understand that a huge hollow buttress, standing at the water's edge, had already been raised to a level with the bank which went sloping down; and in the interior of this buttress it was doubtless intended, as is usual in such cases, to deposit a specimen of each class of current coin together with any other memorials of the actual year which fancy might dictate. The interior of the buttress was large; and over the opening was suspended the massive crowning stone ready to be lowered whenever the attendant ceremony should be fixed to take place.

Having gained the end of the lane, which communicated with a road that ran from the spot where the bridge was being built to the farm-house already alluded to, the lady abruptly quitted the party; and the nobleman said to his two hired ruffians, "We must conceal ourselves here for a short time."

They accordingly all three posted themselves behind a quantity of building-stones piled up in readiness to be used for the bridge; and as the trio were thus placed, no one passing along the road could possibly observe them.

The nobleman now began to give his instructions in a cool, calm, and deliberate manner.

"In the course of half-an-hour or so," he said, "that lady who has just left us, will return down the road, proceeding towards the bridge. She will be accompanied by a young gentleman. They will pass on the other side of this pile of granite-blocks; and you must both rush forth—seize upon the young gentleman—thrust this piece of sponge into his mouth as a gag—and then dispose of him in precisely the manner I shall dictate. You comprehend me?"

"There's no mistake about it, sir," observed the Magsman.

"Plain as the A. B. C.," muttered the Big Beggarman.

"Here, then," resumed the unknown, producing a pocket-book and taking out a portion of its contents,—"here, then, is a five-hundred-pound Bank-note for each of you according to agreement."

"That's what I call business-like," said the Magsman, his eyes gloating over the flimsy representative of the sum named.

"And straight-for'ard," added the Big Beggarman, securing his own note about his person.

There was now a long silence—and every two or three minutes the nobleman looked anxiously in the direction of the farm-house, whither the lady had gone. An increasing nervousness was perceptible in his manner, despite the mask that concealed all that portion of the countenance which expresses the feelings and denotes what is passing in the mind; and the chattering of his teeth was even audible every now and then. At length an ejaculation of pleasure escaped his lips; and the Magsman and Big Beggarman, looking in the same direction, beheld the

lady retracing her way rapidly down the road, leaning on the arm of a gentleman.

The mists of that morning hour had by this time dispersed—and already did a faint quivering in the east denote that the sunbeams were endeavouring to force their way through the heavy atmosphere. The weather was cold—not with the crisp exhilarating freshness of a frosty air, but with the more piercing, penetrating chill of dampness. But though the nobleman trembled, alike with the natural cold and from the influence of harrowing feelings—yet neither the Magsman nor the Big Beggarman appeared in the least degree uncomfortable.

And now, as the lady and the gentleman drew nearer and nearer as they came arm-in-arm along the road, Joe Warren and his accomplice were enabled to observe that the latter was young—apparently about two or three and twenty—tall, slender, handsome, and well-dressed. By his manner, it seemed that he was conversing not only joyously but affectionately with his companion as they walked rapidly on: but from time to time he cast a furtive look behind him towards the farm-house, as if fearful of pursuit. All was still and quiet, however, in that direction.

The lady still wore her mask: but the elegance of her gait and the musical grace of her walk could not be concealed by the ample cloak which enveloped her;—and the Magsman felt convinced that she belonged to the upper class. As for the Big Beggarman, he did not trouble himself much about the matter, his whole thoughts being centred in the reward that he was to gain and of which he had already received a handsome instalment as an earnest.

And now the fatal moment was at hand!

Forth sprang the Magsman and the Big Beggarman from behind the pile of granite blocks:—forth they sprang, we say—like tigers bursting from their lair—and the young gentleman gave vent to a loud cry of mingled amazement and terror as their iron grasp was laid upon him. The masked lady stepped abruptly aside, so as to leave him completely at the mercy of the ruffians; and at that instant the conviction appeared to flash to the mind of the unhappy victim that *she* had betrayed him!

Then, ere the Magsman had time to thrust into his mouth the sponge which the nobleman had given him for the purpose, the young gentleman gave utterance to a moan of bitter anguish, accompanied by the mention of a female Christian name!

And that name was caught by the ears of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman: but the next moment the victim was silenced—for they thrust the gag into his mouth, despite the desperate struggles which he made and the maddened resistance which he offered.

"By heaven! I will shoot him if he dares to utter another word!" exclaimed the nobleman, now springing forth from behind the granite-blocks, with a pistol ready cocked in his hand.

"No—no!" cried the lady, in a stifling voice of profound emotion: "he is silenced now—spill not his blood——"

"Bring him this way, my men!" said the nobleman hastily: and, taking the lady's hand, he led her in advance towards the bridge.

The young gentleman continued to struggle violently: but the united strength of the Magsman and Big Beggarman was irresistible—and they dragged him on towards the spot which the nobleman and the lady had already reached and whither the former was beckoning them with feverish excitement.

But all this took place in far less time than we are occupying in detailing it: comparatively it was the work of a minute—one brief minute, in which fear, despair, agony, and the bitterness of death itself were all concentrated and compressed!

And, O horror of horrors! how can we find words to do justice to the crowning tragedy?

For, in obedience to the signs which the nobleman made, the Magsman and the Beggarman thrust the unhappy, writhing, struggling, despairing youth into the hollow of the buttress: yes—there they thrust him—into that hole they forced him down headlong—and then, loosening the winch-rope which sustained the massive stone above, they let it fall upon the mouth of this living tomb!

It was done—that tremendous deed was accomplished—this astounding crime was consummated!

And, stiffened with dread horror, the nobleman and the lady—appalled by the very tragedy of which they themselves had proved the directing arch-fiends—remained, transfixed as it were to the spot, with their eyes rivetted on that crowning stone beneath which their victim had disappeared.

But the lady was the first to recover her presence of mind—the first to throw off the coils of remorse.

"Come," she said, suddenly starting from that statue-like immoveability into which terror had temporarily paralyzed her, and laying her hand upon the arm of her companion in order to arouse him likewise from the numbness and torpor of his senses;—"come," she repeated—"for we have yet much to do!"

"Would to God that we had never begun this dread work at all!" he murmured in a tone so low that his words escaped the ears of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

"Coward!—you are a coward!" said the lady, the reproach hissing savagely between her lips, as her eyes from behind the mask seemed to shoot forth living fire. "But, come—collect your energies—recall your courage," she added immediately, and in a more conciliatory tone: "remember all the advantages which will ensue from the deed just perpetrated."

"Oh! yes—advantages beyond number—gold to gild the wounded conscience—broad lands to appease the worm of remorse!" ejaculated the nobleman: "marvellous advantages, truly!"—and he laughed the fiendish biting laugh which has the poison of hell in its mirth.

"Merciful God! compose yourself," said the lady, imploringly. "Those men will overhear you——"

"Pardon—forgive me—I knew not what I said nor what I did for the moment," interrupted the nobleman, pressing the lady's hand reassuringly. "Just now, when I proposed to fire upon *him*, it was you who were overcome by your feelings of horror—and now that the deed is done, it is my turn! But come—come away—let us depart—the morning is advancing—the masons will be coming——"

"Come, then—and beware how you give rein to your tongue!" whispered the lady, impressively.

The party now retraced their steps to the car-

riage: the nobleman and his fair companion resumed their places by each other's side—the Magsman and the Big Beggarman seated themselves opposite—the blinds were pulled up again—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away from the vicinage of the spot where so tremendous a crime had been perpetrated.

And still neither the Magsman nor the Big Beggarman entertained the slightest notion of where they were, nor what part of England had been made the theatre of so foul a tragedy.

For upwards of an hour did the carriage proceed without stopping: and at length it halted. The blinds were put down again—the party alighted—and the Magsman and Beggarman, on casting their looks around, perceived that the vehicle was standing at the door of a small but neat cottage on the threshold of which an old man and woman were bowing respectfully to the nobleman and the lady. This habitation stood in a lonely spot, by the side of a narrow road which evidently was not a great highway; and the ivy-covered tower of a village church peeped above a hill at a distance of about two miles.

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman were forthwith conducted by the old couple, who were dressed like peasants in comfortable circumstances, into a neat room serving alike as kitchen and parlour; and their eyes were not only gladdened by the appearance of a cheerful log-fire blazing on the ample hearth, but also by the preparations that were in progress for a comfortable breakfast. A clock, which stood in a corner of the room, showed them that it was now nine o'clock on this memorable morning.

The nobleman and lady remained outside in earnest conversation for nearly ten minutes, at the expiration of which period they entered the cottage. By this time the coffee was made by the old woman; and the lady, having hastily partaken of a cup, but without removing her mask, shook hands with the nobleman and returned to the carriage which instantaneously drove away.

The unknown employer of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman now thrust another five-hundred pound note into the hands of each, whispering at the same time, "You are to remain here until the evening, when some little additional service—but of a less serious nature than the former," he observed significantly, "will be required at your hands. I may as well state that it will be useless for you to put any questions to these good people," he added, turning his masked countenance for a moment towards the old man and woman;—"inasmuch as they will turn a deaf ear to such inquiries. Moreover, should you even cross the threshold of the door without my permission, all the rest of our bargain becomes annulled in an instant and you forfeit the balance of the reward. Now do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," answered the Magsman; "and neither me nor my pal will do anything for you to disapprove of."

"Sit down, then," said the nobleman, "and partake of the breakfast which is now served up."

The men to whom this invitation was addressed, did not require a second bidding: but placing themselves at the table they commenced a desperate onslaught on the hot coffee, home-made bread, rashers of bacon, and new-laid eggs which were served up with no niggard hand. The nobleman, taking off his cloak and appearing in a handsome suit of black, seated himself at a side-table, with his back towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman, so that he might raise his mask conveniently to enable him to eat his breakfast without standing the chance of disclosing his features to those individuals.

The meal being concluded, the Magsman and Beggarman assented to a proposal which was made to them that they should take a few hours' rest in indemnification for the disturbed night which they had passed inside the carriage; and they were accordingly conducted to a bed-chamber. There they slept until the old man came to arouse them at two o'clock in the afternoon with the agreeable intimation that dinner was ready; and, on descending to the lower room, they found a smoking joint, flanked with dishes of vegetables and jugs of home-brewed ale, already served upon the table. To this repast they did ample justice—while the nobleman partook of his dinner at the side-table.

But even if this personage had not wished to place himself in such a manner that he could eat unobserved by the Magsman and Beggarman—even, we mean, if he had worn no mask at all—still he would not have taken a seat at the same table with them. No—that insufferable pride which animates the English aristocracy would have made him loathe and abhor the idea of associating so intimately with men belonging to a lower grade: for not even the companionship of crime—the complicity of murder,—no—not even this hideous connexion could have induced him to fraternise with the paid instruments of his dark iniquity.

The meal being concluded, pipes and tobacco were supplied to the Magsman and his companion, who addressed themselves to the enjoyment thereof accordingly; and the nobleman retired up-stairs, most probably to snatch a few hours rest. At all events he did not re-appear until tea was prepared at about seven o'clock,—Joe Warren and the Beggarman having in the interval smoked countless pipes and emptied numerous jugs of ale.

After tea the two men resumed their pipes: but instead of malt liquor they were now regaled with gin—and by the assistance of the tobacco and the spirits they whiled away the time pleasantly enough until ten o'clock, when an excellent supper was set before them. Of this meal the nobleman refused to partake: but Joe Warren and the Big Beggarman did ample justice to it—for, as they laughingly observed to the people of the house, "eating and drinking never came amiss to them."

At eleven o'clock the nobleman resumed his cloak, beneath which he concealed a dark lantern lent him by the old man, who likewise produced a shovel, a pick-axe, and a bag containing some smaller implements. Of these things the Magsman and the Big Beggarman took charge; and, guided by their unknown employer, they sallied forth from the cottage.

The moon shone brightly, illuminating the whole scene around and bringing the ivy-covered tower of the village church into strong relief. And it was towards this church that the nobleman led his two agents of evil across the fields—a journey which was performed in silence and without meeting a single soul.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE CHURCH.

The party entered the churchyard which was crowded with tomb-stones that gleamed with spectral-like ghastliness in the cold moonlight; and the Magsman began to wonder whether the employer of himself and the Beggarman intended them to perform a little business in the resurrection way before he parted from them.

But the nobleman passed straight along the narrow path which, intersecting the cemetery, led to the church door; and here he stopped. The bag, of which the Big Beggarman had taken charge, furnished a bunch of keys, one of which speedily turned in the lock. The door was thrust open—and the nobleman entered the church with his companions.

The deep silence of the place struck as solemnly upon the heart as the intense chill of the atmosphere did upon the exterior senses; and it was evident that the nobleman felt a species of superstitious awe steal over him—for his hand trembled as he produced the dark lantern from beneath his cloak. As for the Magsman and the Beggarman—they knew not fear of any kind; and the effect of the profound stillness upon their minds was of the most evanescent description.

Passing along the aisle, the nobleman led the way to a small cloistral-looking nook, separated from the body of the church by a screen of sculptured stone, and evidently set apart for the monuments of those families which possessed hereditary sepulchres there.

Stooping down and throwing the light of the lantern in such a manner upon the pavement that he could read the inscriptions graven there, the nobleman in a few moments pointed out a particular

stone, which he bade the two men raise by the help of certain implements which they would find in the bag. At the same time he charged them to perform their work in such a manner that when replaced, the stone should afford no indication of having been recently raised.

The bag, as the nobleman intimated, was found to contain not only all the requisite tools for accomplishing the task now described—but likewise a box of cement for the purpose of refixing the stone in its setting. To work the Magsman and the Big Beggarman therefore went, their employer holding the dark lantern in such a way that while it effectually assisted them, its beams never once permitted them to read a single word of the inscription graven on the stone which they were removing.

In half-an-hour this huge fragment of the dull blue pavement was lifted away from the mouth of the vault which it covered; and a narrow flight of stone steps appeared, leading down into the deep darkness of a sepulchre whence a noisome effluvium exhaled — that peculiar odour which has naught like it, and which at once, even when the source is unknown, carries to the sense a conviction of the vicinage of decomposing mortality.

Having allowed some minutes to elapse for the foul air thus to expend itself, the nobleman bade his two assistants descend into the vault. They obeyed —and he hastened to follow them with the lantern in his hand.

The subterranean was spacious; and round the walls were arranged numerous coffins, in three rows —the lowest standing upon the paved floor, and the other two resting on stout iron supporters projecting from the solid masonry. By these means no coffin actually stood upon another; and between the rows there was space sufficient to enable the plates upon the lids to be examined without moving the coffins themselves.

Despite, however, of the interval allowed for the exhalation of the foul air, the stench which prevailed in the vault was almost intolerable; and the Magsman observed, with a terrible imprecation, that "the sooner they did whatever business there was to do, the better he should like it." With the propriety of this suggestion the Big Beggarman signified his concurrence in a remark that began and ended with oaths more horrible than even the one to which his companion had given utterance; and the blood of the nobleman actually curdled in his veins as this hideous language struck appallingly upon his ears.

"Silence!" he exclaimed, almost sinking beneath the shuddering effects of the cold tremor that passed over him: "such dreadful language is enough to awaken those who sleep around you."

"Me and my pal ain't afraid of the dead, sir," growled the Magsman, with a chuckle which seemed to strike upon the nobleman's mind as something that did him harm.

"I should think not!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman, with even a coarser and more brutal laugh. "I never did see any ghostesses yet—and if so be the dead does walk at times, this is a very favourable opportunity for one of 'em to get up and enjoy a mouthful of fresh air."

But scarcely were these words uttered, when a tremendous explosion, like the report of a cannon, sounded through the vault, accompanied with an effluvium so horrible—so nauseating—so stifling, as scarcely to leave the nobleman and his two assistants the power to scramble up the stone steps and retreat into the purer air of the aisle of the church.

The lantern, which the masked unknown carried in his hand, threw its gleaming rays upon the disturbed and agitated countenances of the two men, whose souls were now filled with a consternation which they vainly endeavoured to conceal from each other.

"What the devil could that have been, Joe?" demanded the Big Beggarman, throwing a stealthy look around him, as if he almost expected to see some hideous shape emerging from the obscurity that reigned beyond the scope of the lamp-light.

"I should say that it was Satan warning us not to trespass in his domains," answered the Magsman, with an ineffectual attempt at a chuckle: for the fellow was so bewildered by a din to him utterly unaccountable as to be really frightened, although he endeavoured to put a good face upon the matter.

"Banish your fears," said the nobleman, who had remained silent for a few minutes in order most probably that the recent occurrence should have time to produce a certain effect upon the men and induce them to abstain from that horrible language in which they had indulged in the vault and which sounded like tremendous blasphemy in his ears; but now perceiving that the incident was not calculated to produce any such beneficial effect, he thought it useless to delay any longer an explanation of the phenomenon which had frightened them. "The noise which startled us all three," he accordingly continued, "and which drove us so quickly from the vault, was caused by the sudden explosion of a leaden coffin."

"Well—I'm blowed if ever I should have thought of that!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman.

"It is nevertheless as I tell you," resumed the nobleman; "and you can now understand likewise the cause of the dreadful odour which assailed us at the same moment that the din fell upon our ears. It was from the effluvium, and not from the explosive din, that I beat so rapid a retreat. But we may now return to the vault."

Thither they accordingly retraced their steps; and, when once more in the subterranean, they perceived that one of the coffins on the uppermost row at the farther extremity, had burst completely open, and that a half decomposed corpse was exposed to view. A shudder passed visibly over the nobleman's frame—for his hand trembled so violently that he nearly dropped the lantern: but, regaining his composure with a great effort, he averted his eyes from the ghastly spectacle, and began to examine the plates on the coffins of the highest tier on the right hand side from the entrance.

While thus engaged, his back was turned towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman: but every other instant he cast a rapid glance furtively around to assure himself that they were contemplating no treachery of any kind. In a few minutes he discovered the particular coffin-plate which, as it appeared, he sought: and, while his eyes lingered upon the inscription, the Magsman, who on his side had been rigidly though unsuspectedly watching all his movements, suddenly plucked off a signet-ring from one of the rotting fingers of the corpse that lay exposed in the broken leaden coffin.

This was the work of an instant; the nobleman saw it not—and, while the Big Beggarman nodded approvingly, Joe Warren secured the ring, in his

waistcoat pocket. But scarcely was the feat performed, when the employer of the two ruffians turned round and bade them take a chisel from the bag and remove the plate from the particular coffin to which he pointed. This was soon done—the nobleman holding the lantern in such a manner that, while it assisted the operation, it permitted not the operators themselves to read the inscription on the plate.

"What next?" demanded the Magsman, as the nobleman secured about his person the plate upon which he seized the moment it was wrenched away from the coffin-lid.

"Hold the light, and stand a little farther off," was the response.

Joe Warren and the Beggarman accordingly fell back a few paces, the former receiving the lantern from the hands of the nobleman, who now producing *another* plate from beneath his cloak, proceeded to fasten it on in the place whence the old one had been removed. This task was easily accomplished by means of four black screws and a screw-driver taken from the bag.

"Now we have done all our business in the vault," said the nobleman; and, receiving back the lantern from the Magsman, he led the way from the noisome subterranean which was still pervaded with a stifling, fetid odour that made the stomach sick, the heart heave, and the tongue experience a thick, clammy, and nauseating taste.

The Magsman and the Beggarman replaced the stone over the mouth of the vault: the box of cement already alluded to was brought into requisition; and the entire pavement, now uniform once more, was swept lightly with a small brush supplied by the bag—so that there was not the slightest indication nor appearance calculated to excite a suspicion of the sanctuary for the dead having been disturbed. And it may likewise be as well to reiterate the observation that while thus employed in consigning the huge flag back to its setting, the two men were not permitted by the masked unknown to catch a glimpse of the inscription graven upon it.

"Now follow me," he said, when this portion of the task was accomplished; and, quitting the cloistral nook, he led the way to the farther end of the church, where one of the keys upon the large bunch already mentioned, soon opened a door near the communion-table.

The party now entered the vestry, which was a small room, carpetted, and surrounded by bench-seats. A surplice and black gown hung against the wall; and in a half-open cupboard an empty decanter and two or three wine-glasses appeared upon a shelf. Over the mantel-piece there was a diminutive mirror, to the nail sustaining which a pair of clerical bands was hanging. From one side of the vestry-room a sort of closet opened; and in this recess was kept the iron safe containing the parish registers.

Giving the lantern to the Magsman, the nobleman tried the small keys of his bunch, one after the other, without any effect. The door of the iron safe remained immoveable—the lock afforded no symptoms of yielding.

"If it do not give way by fair means, it shall by foul!" exclaimed the unknown, the lower portion of his countenance which the mask left revealed, flushing with the excitement of impatience and vexation.

"Me and my pal would soon make light work of it," observed the Magsman. "There's plenty of implements in the bag that would force the obstinate safe."

"In fact," added the Big Beggarman, thinking it necessary to thrust in a word, "there's no safety at all in a safe when me and Joe Warren are concerned."

"You shall try your hands upon it if I cannot manage it without violence," said the nobleman. "But see—this key appears to fit it—yes—it yields—it yields!" he exclaimed, with an inexpressible outburst of joy which led his two assistants to believe that this was not the least important incident in the night's adventures. "Now that your services are not required for the moment," continued the unknown, as he drew forth one of the registers from the safe,—"you can seat yourselves and dispose of a flask ot brandy while I inspect this book."

Thus speaking, he produced a case-bottle from beneath his cloak; and while the two ruffians sate down upon one of the benches in the vestry to enjoy it, the nobleman placed himself at the table for the purpose of examining the register.

With the lantern near him in such a manner that its light fell upon the pages as he turned them slowly over after a careful inspection of each, the unknown bent over the huge parochial volume with an attitude that denoted an absorbing interest; and though all the upper portion of his countenance was concealed by the black mask, yet there was an expression about the mouth which indicated a profound anxiety lest the record that he sought should not be there.

Leaf after leaf did he turn over—a quarter of an hour passed—the men emptied the brandy-flask—and then they conversed in low whispers. The nobleman seemed to have forgotten their presence, so profoundly absorbed was he in the register: and thus, while he was diligently searching for some entry, the ensuing dialogue took place between them.

"This is the rummest lark altogether that I ever knew in all my life," observed the Magsman.

"It's a reglar romance," returned the Big Beggarman. "But have you any idea whereabouts in England we are?"

"Not the remotest," was the response. "To do the gentleman justice, he has managed matters so well that he has even baffled *us* in that respect. But the day *may* come, my fine feller," added the Magsman significantly, "when we shall find out everything that is now so strange and mysterious. At present we've two distinct clues——"

"Two!" repeated the Big Beggarman: "how d'ye make that out? I only know of the signet-ring which you took off the finger of the mouldy stiff 'un down in the vault——"

"And the Christian name of that lady," added the Magsman. "Didn't you catch it?"

"To be sure I did!" was the reply. "What a fool I am to overlook such an important point. Besides, such a peculiar Christian name too——"

"Ah! it was a nice-looking young feller that screamed out that name," observed the Magsman. "It was almost a pity to put him into the hole. I wonder who the deuce he could have been——"

"And while you're wondering, you may just as well wonder about who the lady was also—and who

our friend *there* is," continued the Big Beggarman, nodding his head towards the nobleman who was still poring over the register. "But I say, Joe," added the ruffian, sinking his voice to a whisper that was scarcely audible, "what's to prevent us from knocking him on the head and helping ourselves to the contents of his pocket-book, instead of waiting till he pays us the balance at Liverpool?"

"Lord bless ye, my dear Stephen," returned the Magsman, in the same subdued tone; "do you suppose that I haven't been thinking of the same thing ever since I saw him take out his pocket-book for the first time, this morning when we were standing behind the pile of granite blocks? To be sure I have—and when we were smoking our pipes after dinner in the cottage, I was half a mind to propose to you to cut *his* throat and the old man's and woman's throats also, and so make light work of the business at once. But I thought better of it—and I tell you now that it's more to our interests to let things take their course."

"How so?" demanded the Beggarman. "Suppose the pocket-book contained more than he has still got to pay us?—then we should be the gainers."

"And suppose it contains less?" returned the Magsman, with a knowing look: "in this case we should be the losers. And it may be probable that the gentleman intends to get more money at Liverpool—or that he has left his pocket-book behind him at the cottage——"

"Well, there's certainly them chances against us," said the Beggarman, in a musing tone, although still speaking in a low whisper.

"But that's not the only calculation I've been making," continued the Magsman. "Of course we don't mean to go to America: *that* you and me have already decided upon between ourselves. Well, now—suppose we some day find out who *he* is—and who the lady is—and what all this business means?—why, let his fortune be whatever it will, at least half of it must find its way into our pockets. He couldn't refuse it—nor the lady either, whoever she is. They're completely in our power; and as they're no doubt well off already, and most likely mean to be much richer still—for this affair hasn't been undertaken for nothing, mark ye—it will be a splendid thing for us to find out who they are and have a hold upon them."

"You're right, Joe," observed the Big Beggarman, convinced by this reasoning: "we musn't knock him on the head. He'll be more use to us living—I see that now."

"To be sure," rejoined the Magsman; and, the question being thus disposed of, the matter dropped.

But while the two ruffians had been thus coolly and calmly deliberating upon the propriety or impropriety of assassinating their masked employer,—he on his part had succeeded in discovering the particular record which he sought in the parochial volume. A smile played upon his lip—and he rubbed his hands together joyfully. Then, taking a pen-knife from his pocket, he carefully scratched out certain words in that entry which regarded his interests or his views; and with equal caution he rubbed over it a very fine powder, or species of pounce, which he had brought for the purpose. The effect was that when he wrote *other words* in the place of those which he had erased, the ink did not run with an improper thickness upon the paper, nor afford any sign or indication that such a substitution had taken place. In fact, the forgery was complete and faultless in its execution: the handwriting of the original entry was imitated to a nicety;—and when the ink was entirely dry, the nobleman rubbed the paper gently with the tip of his fore-finger on which he collected a little dust by passing it along the mantelpiece. The result was to take away from the leaf that whiteness which appeared where the pen-knife had scratched it; and the page thus wore an uniform aspect, as if it had never been tampered with.

The register was now returned to its place—the safe was locked again—and the nobleman quitted the vestry, followed by his two agents. Along the aisle they proceeded, their footsteps raising echoes which made it seem as if there were other midnight visitors in the church: but this they knew to be a delusion—and in safety they emerged from the temple which their presence had so desecrated.

The nobleman was careful to lock the door behind him; and the trio retraced their way through the cemetery—across the fields—back to the cottage, at the door of which they found the travelling-carriage in readiness.

The reader will remember that the masked lady had taken her departure in the vehicle immediately after breakfast in the morning: and it had now returned to convey the nobleman and his two hired bravos to Liverpool.

The old couple were sitting up at the cottage, into which the Magsman and the Beggarman were invited to enter and partake of some hasty refreshment. The clock in the room showed them it was nearly two in the morning; and thus their nocturnal expedition had occupied three hours.

While they were regaling themselves with some cold meat and hot spirits-and-water, the nobleman presented them each with a hundred pounds, observing, "This is for the extra work which you have done to-night. The balance of the large sum due to both of you shall be paid, according to agreement, when you stand upon the deck of the American packet at Liverpool."

The men expressed their satisfaction;—and, the meal being concluded, they entered the carriage, followed by the nobleman.

The blinds were drawn up—total darkness reigned within—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away,—thus perpetuating that deep mystery which had all along been maintained towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman respecting the whereabouts of those scenes through which they had passed, and the locality of those incidents in which they had borne so large a share.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE WAY-SIDE COTTAGE.—THE ACCIDENT.

THE journey was continued in profound silence; for the nobleman did not choose to converse with his hireling assassins—and the two men themselves, overcome with weariness, soon fell into a profound slumber. Even when the carriage stopped to change horses, they did not wake up: but at length they were aroused by some one shaking them violently—and then they found that several hours must have passed away. For the blinds were down—the misty grey light of the dawn was throwing a sort of hall

relief upon the tall buildings of a town at a short distance—and the vehicle was standing at the door of a small cottage, not half so comfortable-looking as the one which had previously afforded the men such good cheer.

The nobleman it was who had aroused his followers; and they all alighted at this dwelling, the only inhabitant of which appeared to be a very aged, but bustling, active woman, remarkably clean though homely in her apparel. She conducted them into her cottage, where the table was already spread for breakfast; and it therefore struck both the Magsman and Beggarman that their presence was not unexpected. This idea was confirmed, when the nobleman, bidding them follow him up-stairs, conducted them to a chamber where he showed them two trunks full of clothing, observing at the same time, "Here is a complete wardrobe for each of you: so that the instant we reach Liverpool you will have nothing to do but to step on board a ship which will sail immediately afterwards. But you will do well to throw aside the apparel you now have on, and dress yourselves in the garments provided for you. In a word, it will be prudent to make yourselves look as decent and respectable as possible."

Having thus spoken, the masked unknown quitted the chamber, closing the door behind him.

"Well, I'm blowed if things ain't done by magic now-a-days," said the Magsman. "In the first place a carriage was ready waiting for us the night before last when we met our employer in Hyde Park: then, when we reached the bridge, yesterday morning, the lady had nothing to do but walk up to a house and lead forth her victim just for all the world as if she carried a wand which he was bound to obey. Next we are whirled away to a cottage where a comfortable old couple have got everything nice and in readiness to entertain us. At night, a bag is furnished with every implement necessary for the visit to the church-vault—even to the very keys that are to open the church-doors themselves. And now we come this morning to another cottage, where breakfast is ready to serve up, and where a couple of trunks full of all kinds of toggery are waiting for us."

"It looks like a fairy tale, Joe," said the Beggarman. "But instead of troubling ourselves about how the trunks and the toggery come here, let us inspect the first and try on the last."

"So we will," observed the Magsman.

The examination of the boxes accordingly commenced; and in each one were found two suits of clothes, shirts, stockings, handkerchiefs, hair-brushes, combs, shaving-tackle, boots—in fine, everything necessary for the outfit of men who were about to undertake a tolerably long voyage. The clothing was of good but plain materials, and was of that kind which a respectable artizan or operative would purchase.

"Well," ejaculated the Big Beggarman, at last breaking the long silence which had prevailed during the inspection of the various articles: "as sure as my name is Stephen Price, I mean to transmogrify myself in a jiffey. I've taken a sudden fit of cleanliness into my head—and I'll see if I can't make myself look a little respectable."

"You'll never look anything else but a gallows'-bird," said the Magsman, with a coarse laugh.

"Well, Joe," was the retort, "whenever I mount the scaffold, you won't be many paces either before or behind me—and the same funeral service will do for us both. But here is a capital razor; and I mean to have a good shave on the chin at present, whether or not Jack Ketch shall hereafter have the handling of my throat."

The two men proceeded to perform their toilette; and having washed and shaven themselves, they each put on clean linen and a new suit of clothes.

"Somehow or another, I don't feel comfortable when togged off in this fashion," said the Magsman, as he surveyed himself in a little looking-glass that hung to the whitewashed wall of the humble chamber. "You know that even when I've had hundreds of pounds in my pocket, I've never put myself out of the way to look clean or decent; and an old rough coat has always pleased me better than a new one. The fact is, Stephen, respectability don't suit me."

"And I never liked it until now," responded the Big Beggarman. "But I mean to give it a fair trial for a short time."

"I'm afraid you're too ugly, Stephen, to play your new part properly," observed the Magsman, chuckling at the compliment which he thus paid his associate. "But let's go down stairs and see if breakfast's ready: for I'm as hungry as if I hadn't had anything to eat for a month past."

"Come along, then," said the Beggarman;—and they descended accordingly.

In the room below, the masked unknown was already partaking of coffee at a side table; and the old woman hastened to serve up a copious repast to the two men, who did speedy and ample justice to the fare.

The nobleman glanced towards them to assure himself that they had obeyed his instructions and rendered themselves as decent and respectable-looking as possible: and, being satisfied on that point, he said to the old woman, "Have the goodness to pack up the two trunks without delay, so that they may be in readiness by the time the carriage returns with the fresh horses."

"Yes, my lord," responded the old crone, dropping a curtsey.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the nobleman, instantaneously perceiving that the quick ears of the Magsman and Beggarman had caught those tell-tale words which betrayed his rank: and starting from his seat, he walked once or twice, hastily and evidently in great irritation, up and down the room.

"I beg pardon—sir—my——" stammered the old woman, comprehending the fatal error which she had committed by allowing her tongue to give such glib and ready utterance to the sounding distinction of "My lord."

"Begone—and do as I have commanded you," said the unknown, pointing imperiously towards the staircase, up which the old woman hurried with an agility that was truly marvellous for one of such advanced age as she evidently was.

The Magsman and Beggarman proceeded with their breakfast as if nothing extraordinary had happened, and forebore from any remark on the little incident which had just revealed to them the fact that their employer was of aristocratic rank: for it will be remembered that although the readers have all along been aware that the masked unknown was a nobleman, his dialogue with Mrs. Brace on the night of the Magsman's intrusion having caused that circumstance to transpire—yet that the two ruffians now became acquainted with it for the first time.

But in spite of the seeming air of indifference with which they continued to attack the copious fare set before them, it had been evident to the nobleman at the first glance which he cast towards them as the fatal "My lord" fell from the old woman's lips, that their ears had not failed to catch the words: and he could scarcely control even within moderate bounds the rage which he experienced towards the crone whose inadvertence had thus betrayed his rank. But he soon began to reflect that although his hireling assassins had learnt that he was *a lord*, they were still in utter ignorance of *his title;* and consoling himself with this fact, he thought it prudent not to condescend to the slightest remark on the occurrence. He even spoke in a civil and conciliatory manner to the old woman when she returned to the room—evidently for the purpose of soothing her feelings for the irritation he had previously shown.

The Magsman and the Beggarman, having finished their breakfast, were desired by the nobleman to fetch down their trunks, which the crone had packed up for them; and, on ascending to the chamber for this purpose, Joe Warren observed in a low whisper and with a significant look, "Wasn't I right, my good feller, when I made up my mind not to knock this niblike cove on the head? Now we've discovered that he's a lord—and it's probable the lady that was with us all the night before last is of high rank also. Let me tell you, Stephen, that this is as pleasant and promising an affair as we have ever had in hand."

"And we'll make the most of it, Joe," responded the Big Beggarman. "It ought to prove as good as an annuity for us."

Having thus exchanged their sentiments, the two ruffians shouldered their trunks and descended to the ground-floor again. The carriage, which had driven away to change horses during breakfast time, returned in a few minutes; and the men lashed their luggage on to the roof. They then entered the vehicle—the nobleman followed them—the blinds were drawn up once more—and the journey was continued at a rapid rate.

Between three and four hours passed away, during which the horses had been changed twice,—when the carriage suddenly broke down as it was whirling speedily on. The nobleman instantly put down the blinds—opened the door—and leapt out; and a glance at the fore axle-tree, which had snapped in halves, convinced him that some hours must elapse ere the accident could be repaired.

Having consulted with the postilion for a few moments, he returned to the carriage-door and desired the two men to alight. Then drawing them aside beyond ear-shot of the post-boy, he said, "You perceive that our journey has experienced an interruption; and we must therefore part company at once. Those buildings which rise above yonder trees, belong to the town of Warrington; and Liverpool is only seventeen or eighteen miles distant from that place. You will proceed thither without delay; and on arriving at Liverpool, inquire for the *Royal George* brig. You will find the captain on board; and upon your telling him that your names are Jones and Thompson, he will instantly assign you to the berths which have been already engaged and paid for on your account."

"All that is easy enough," said the Magsman; "and the arrangements have no doubt been made in capital style. But who's to pay us the other fifteen hundred a-piece which is still due! No offence, my lord—but——"

"Silence!" ejaculated the nobleman, imperiously. "You have surely had sufficient proofs of my generosity to be well aware that I am not likely to deceive or defraud you in any one respect. It never was my intention to accompany you all the way to Liverpool—though it certainly was not my purpose to part from you at such a distance as this. But arrangements had already been made respecting the payment of the remaining amount due to each of you; and so soon as you have taken possession of your berths on board the *Royal George*, the captain, who has been led to believe that you are political offenders voluntarily deporting yourselves in order to escape a severer sentence, will place fifteen hundred pounds in the hands of each."

"And if he should prove to be a rascal and stick to the blunt?" said the Magsman, not altogether admiring the arrangement.

"You have nothing to fear, my good fellow," rejoined the nobleman, in a tone of decision. "It is neither consistent with my views nor my interest to afford you any excuse or pretext for remaining in England. The money will therefore be paid to you as faithfully and as honourably as the instalments which you have already received."

"But why can't you settle with us now, my lord?" demanded the Magsman, his tone and aspect assuming a slight degree of menace.

"For two reasons," was the prompt and resolute answer. "Because I choose you to quit England, according to our bargain—and because I have not sufficient funds about my person to liquidate one tenth part of the amount now due to you. Look here, my good fellow," he continued, in a still more impressive and significant tone, while his eyes, shining through the mask, were fixed earnestly and searchingly on the Magsman's countenance: "you will reap no advantage by being obstinate or attempting to frustrate my will. If you rebel against my authority *now*—why, we must fight it out with our pistols, that's all: and if you kill me, you will not have improved your own position one jot. As for any threats of exposure which you might utter, I laugh at *them* and defy *you*. We will not mince matters: you have learnt, through the inadvertency of a foolish old woman who forgot the injunctions of secrecy which she had received, that I am a nobleman. Well—granted that I am—granted even that you discover what my title is,—who on earth would believe your tale if you were to narrate all that has occured within the last forty-eight hours? Besides, even were it believed, would you not be criminating yourselves as seriously as me? On the other hand, suppose that I were to accuse you of having stopped me on this highway and robbed me of all the Bank-notes which you have *now* in your possession,—in what predicament would you be then? You therefore perceive, my good fellows, that it is useless for you to show your teeth at me; and you had better make up your minds to continue on the same pleasant and agreeable understanding which has hitherto prevailed."

"I'm sure we don't want to quarrel with your lordship," said the Magsman, who could not shut his eyes to the truth of all the reasoning which had just fallen upon his ears. "But you must see that you have got entirely the advantage of us. You know who we are—and we don't know who you are:

you have got money to pay us—and we have no means of obtaining it unless you choose to give it;—and when once on board the ship, we shall be prisoners no doubt and unable to come on shore again even if the captain should refuse to hand us over the balance due to us."

"Once for all I tell you that the money *will* be paid to you—and I can say no more," exclaimed the nobleman, angrily;—"unless indeed it be to remind you of the regularity, the precision, and the forethought which have characterised all the proceedings from the moment we left London until the present time,—and which ought to serve you as sufficient evidence that the person or persons by whom all these arrangements have been so effectually made, are not likely to fall into any error or mistake relative to so paltry a detail in the grand drama as the ensuring to you the punctual and honourable payment of the balance due. No, my good fellows—money is not such an object to me as to render it necessary that I should cheat you, or suffer you to be cheated. Moreover, I may as well observe that the captain of the *Royal George* will deliver you each a sealed letter, enclosing the sums due; but he is not even acquainted with the nature of the contents of those letters, and has not therefore any inducement to purloin them."

"Well, I suppose we must take your lordship's word," said the Magsman, after exchanging a look with the Beggarman.

"In that case you had better lose no time in continuing your journey," observed the nobleman. "Warrington is before you—and you can easily carry your trunks on your shoulders into that town. A conveyance to Liverpool may be obtained without difficulty; and in a few hours you will be standing on the deck of the *Royal George*."

"Come along, then, mate," exclaimed the Magsman.

The two ruffians accordingly took down their trunks from the roof of the travelling-carriage—threw them upon their shoulders—bade the nobleman farewell—and jogged leisurely along the road to Warrington.

While thus journeying on, Mr. Joseph Warren and Mr. Stephen Price discussed their plans and laid down the course which circumstances now rendered it necessary for them to pursue: but as the resolutions to which they thus came will transpire in the sequel, we need not record them now. Suffice it, therefore, to say that on gaining Warrington they entered a tavern, where they ordered dinner; and while it was being gotten ready, they wrote letters to the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll in London. These they conveyed to the post with their own hands, some hanger-on about the inn showing them the way; and, having enjoyed a hearty meal, they took their places outside a coach bound to Liverpool.

The short distance of eighteen miles was accomplished pleasantly enough; for the two men smoked cigars the whole way, and got down to refresh themselves with glasses of ale every time the vehicle stopped.

It was about five o'clock in the evening when they entered Liverpool; and on inquiring in the proper quarter, they soon ascertained that a brig called the *Royal George* was lying in the Mersey, ready to sail for the United States of North America. A boat conveyed them on board the vessel; and, on being introduced to the captain, they announced themselves, the Magsman by the name of Jones and the Big Beggarman by the appellation of Thompson.

"All right," said the skipper, who was a short, thick set, bullet-headed, red-faced man, attired in a complete suit of rough blue, and with a gold-laced band round his cap. "Come down below, mates—and we'll have two or three words in private together."

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman followed the captain down the companion-ladder into a neat little cabin, lighted by a lamp suspended to the ceiling: for as it was now past sunset and the shades of night were gathering fast around, the stern windows looked dull and lustreless as lead.

"Sit down, my friends—make yourselves at home," said the captain, as he opened a locker and produced a bottle of spirits, glasses, and cigars. "We shall have a pleasant trip—and my instructions are to treat you as well as the rough accommodations of shipboard will permit. Come—help yourselves: the grog is good—the havannahs excellent."

"Have you got any letters for us?" demanded the Magsman, scarcely able to curb his impatience: for he naturally considered that the response to this question would prove at once whether the nobleman had acted honourably or had played a treacherous part.

"Yes—one for Mr. Jones—and t'other for Mr. Thompson," said the captain, producing two sealed packets from the locker whence he had taken the refreshments. "Here they are—and I'll leave you to read them by yourselves for a few minutes while I give some orders on deck."

Thus speaking the mariner threw the letters upon the table, and then quitted the cabin, closing behind him the door at the bottom of the companion.

"Well—I suppose it's all right," said the Big Beggarman, opening the packet addressed to Mr. Thompson, while his companion proceeded to inspect the one directed to Mr. Jones.

"Damnation!" thundered the latter, suddenly breaking the short pause which had occurred, during which they had both run their eyes over the contents of the letters. "We weren't prepared for *this*, Price!" he exclaimed in a tone of diabolical ferocity, at the same time dashing his clenched fist so violently down upon the table that he made the bottle and glasses dance with a jingling sound.

"He's got the better of us so far, Joe," returned the Big Beggarman, in a voice expressive of a more deeply concentrated rage. "But what's to be done?"

At this moment the cheerful chorus of the sailors, accompanying the heaving up of the anchor, came swelling and oscillating upon the ears of the two men: and they knew thereby that the ship was about to sail.

Springing from his seat with the fury of a goaded lion, the Magsman tore open the door and rushed up the companion-ladder: but his head came in contact with something that barred his way—he thrust up his hands in the darkness—and they encountered the hatch which was fast battened down over the aperture communicating with the deck. A growl, terrible and savage as that of a hyæna, burst from his throat; and with all his herculean strength he endeavoured to force up the trap-door.

But it resisted his efforts as completely as if he

were struggling to move the most solid masonry; and, baffled, defeated, and furious, he stepped back again into the cabin, where he filled a tumbler to the brim with raw spirit, which he drank at a single draught.

"We are done, old feller—done as nicely as that scoundrel of a nobleman could possibly have wished!" he exclaimed at length, when the stifling sensation of the fiery alcohol had somewhat passed out of his throat.

"So I see," observed the Beggarman, who appeared to take the matter more coolly than his companion. "But it will be a very strange and very unusal thing, Joe, if any one gets the better of us for long together."

"True, my dear feller," rejoined the Magsman: "and it isn't by putting ourselves into a passion that we shall mend the present aspect of affairs. Come—let's drink and smoke, since we're prisoners in this infernal den of a cabin; and to-morrow when our heads are cool and we've slept over it, we shall be better able to discuss what's to be done in the present emergency."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman, lighting a cigar by the lamp that swung overhead.

And while the two ruffians were regaling themselves in the cabin, the anchor was weighed—the sails were unfurled—and the *Royal George* began to plough the deep waters of the Mersey.

CHAPTER XCIII.

ROYALTY'S MORNING AMUSEMENT.

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the morning; and the Prince of Wales, wrapped in an elegant dressing-gown, was seated in one of the splendid saloons of Carlton House, feasting his eyes upon the forms of six charming creatures who were dancing in his presence.

Cheerful fires blazed in the two grates which heated the room: the light of broad day fell with a roseate tint through the heavy crimson curtains; —and the atmosphere was warm and perfumed.

A beautiful young woman was seated at a piano, the strains of which she rendered appropriate to the complete pantomime of voluptuousness which the dancers were performing: for the melody was poured forth in soft transitions from the grave to the lively—from the energetic to the tender, according to the passions or sentiments pourtrayed by those witching English bayaderes.

Dressed in the gauzy garb of the ballet,—that attire, which although so scanty as to leave the form half naked, is in itself so nearly transparent as to allow little scope for the exercise of the imagination with respect to those charms which it covers,—the six dancing-girls had evidently been chosen on account of their superior fascinations to minister to the pleasures of the royal voluptuary.

As specimens of female loveliness they were perfect—glorious examples of woman's enchanting beauty—splendid models of all the outward graces and seductive charms of their sex. And as they were grouped together in the voluptuous dance which they were executing, it was impossible to be otherwise than ravished with the softness, smoothness, and polish of their forms—the gradual and easy transition between all their contours—the harmony of the undulating lines which their busts, their figures, and their limbs presented in every view—the flexibility and grace which distinguished all their motions—and the breezy and floating appearance which they assumed in the performance of that pantomime of the passions.

Now did their eyes, speaking to the very soul of the Prince, produce an effect as if a succession of dreamy and sensuous raptures were stealing slowly and softly upon him; then glances of passion, rapidly and fervently darted, sent a thrill of ecstacy through his heart:—now he experienced joyous moments of melting tenderness as they stretched out their white arms towards him, as if wooing him to their delicious embraces; then, as they gently and gradually assumed attitudes in which wantonness was exquisitely blended with the most seductive grace, he felt the blood course like lightning in its crimson channels and his passions were excited almost to a fever and a delirium.

Again—while the music pours forth its delicious melody—the dancers perform steps well calculated to show off their rounded yet elastic limbs, and rest for a few moments at a time in positions that display their symmetrical figures to the best advantage. Then from these attitudes of repose—so full of soft and voluptuous languor—they slowly melt as it were once more into the gentle undulations of a subdued, soft, and noiseless dance,—depicting all the phases of love's passions and enjoyment by the sweet motion of the mouth, the eyes, the rounding arms, the arching neck, and the wavy, floating appearance of the figure. Thus, enchanting the mind and ravishing the senses, their graceful but voluptuous performance carried the soul through all the grades of sensuous emotion—through all the transitions of soft excitement—and through all the phases of impassioned rapture.

For these six beauteous votaries of the Terpsichorean art appealed to the sense rather than broke abruptly upon it,—insinuated the soft witchery of their own loveliness and the magic tenderness of their performance, rather than excited the passions all in a moment; and in the same way that a liquid and silver voice steals deliciously upon the ear, while a shrill exclamation would only startle and annoy,—so did the united charms of the dancers and their dance gradually enthral the feelings of the Prince in the bliss of an elysian dream.

He beheld before him no unfeminine vaulting—no childish spinning and whirling with lightning speed —no uncouth distortion of limb threatening dislocation, and producing an unpleasant effect upon the spectator:—but all was softness of motion—gentleness of undulation—and gracefulness of attitude,—as if a melting poesy and a flowing rhythm were applied to gesture in order to express the warmth of sentiment, the sunny glow of passion, and the fervid rapture of ecstatic enjoyment.

By thus avoiding all rapid, thrilling, and exhausting successions of violent action, the six dancers were enabled to throw a profoundly sensual and a deliciously seductive power alike into their countenances and their movements; so that now their eyes swam in liquid wantonness as by their attitudes they permitted the licentious looks of the Prince to feast upon their swelling bosoms,—then, ere his gaze was even half-satiated, they resumed the slow and undulating movements which displayed the finished form of their limbs and the rich contours of their

[THE PRINCESSES SOPHIA AND AMELIA.]

fine persons: now they would pause again to exhibit their capacity for grace of attitude,—then, gently awakening into life again, they produced an effect as of harmonious feelings in the mind, apart from the real music which stole in all the soft richness of the piano's melody upon the ear.

Not only was there grace in the performance of the dancers, but likewise intellectuality and refinement. In depicting the feelings and tender delights of love, they put forth all their most seducing power and gave a new charm to every attitude of the body, every movement of the limbs, and every expression of the countenance. Juvenile lightness and freshness were subdued into a soft sensuousness that appealed to the imagination, enabling it not only to feast itself upon the charms which were exposed, but likewise to revel in the beauties that were hidden.

And, oh! the licentious Prince both feasted and revelled in the spectacle thus provided for his morning's diversion: and when he was actually surfeited with the excess of that bliss which his prurient imagination had conjured up, he bade the music and the dancing cease, in order that the young females might congregate around him and enhance by means of sparkling champagne the excitement to which the general feeling was already worked up.

And now—even at this early hour—commenced a revel in which the heir-apparent to the British throne was the hero, and a bevy of ballet-girls the heroines,—a revel in which *he* laid aside all the little dignity which his mind possessed, and *they* forgot all the trifling amount of modesty which a profligate career had left them.

With one of these charming syrens upon each knee, the Prince of Wales gave unbridled license to his tongue; and the conversation which ensued would have disgraced a brothel. The champagne flowed freely; and the more frequent grew the libations, the more unblushingly was the disguise of language torn from the lascivious ideas which cir-

culated as unrestrainedly as the wine. The Prince pressed his lips, hot with the breath of lust, to the rich red mouths that were moistened with the generous juice of the grape; and on his fevered brow and burning cheeks those courtezans of the Opera imprinted their harlot kisses.

Presently the musician, obedient to a signal which he gave her, returned to the piano: and while the glorious instrument was made to desecrate itself by pouring forth its rich strains in a libidinous measure, the dancing-girls united their voices in the obscene air to which it belonged.

The orgie was thus at its height—and the Prince of Wales was joining in the ribald song,—when the door was suddenly thrown open, and a page announced—"The King!"

Heavens! what a scene of confusion instantaneously followed—and what a spectacle was this to greet the eyes of a monarch and a father!

The musician sprang with a shriek from the piano—the two girls started with responsive screams from the knees of the Prince—the rest fluttered round the table, not knowing how to act and wishing the floor would open and swallow them up: here a champagne-glass was dropped and broken—there a bottle was overturned with a clattering din—and a fruit-dish, being upset in the hurry and bewilderment of the scene, scattered its contents upon the floor.

King George III stood aghast! The consternation of mingled horror and amazement was expressed upon his naturally stolid countenance—his hands were spread out fan-like from his wrists—his eye-balls glared wildly—and his whole attitude was so absurd in its indignation, that, were he not the British Sovereign, he would have been saluted with peals of laughter instead of received with looks of dismay.

The Prince of Wales was for a few moments so astounded by this sudden apparition of his august father that he remained transfixed to his seat, staring vacantly upon him: but suddenly recovering some portion of his presence of mind, he started up and waved his hand imperiously to the ballet-girls to withdraw. This tacit but unmistakable command recalled *them* also from their bewilderment and confusion: and, as if seized with a panic terror, they rushed towards the door communicating with an inner room,—their gauze drapery fluttering airily—their supple and exquisitely formed limbs moving glancingly, and the nymph-like lightness of their forms acquiring a soaring appearance, as they fled—or rather flew—like a bevy of affrighted fairies from the presence of some uncouth mortal who had intruded upon their sacred retreat.

The apartment was thus cleared of the courtezans of the Opera—and the Prince of Wales found himself alone with the King: for the page who escorted his Majesty thither, had prudently retired the moment he caught a glimpse of the aspect of affairs.

Covered with shame—half tipsy with the generous juice of Epernay which he had imbibed—and not knowing whether to assume an air of contrition or defiance, the Prince of Wales stood balancing himself by holding on to the back of the chair whence he had risen, and gazing vacantly on the countenance of the King who was looking fully as stupidly at him.

"Dreadful—horrible—dreadful!" at length ejaculated the monarch. "I couldn't have believed it, George—I couldn't have believed it. Knew you were wild—but didn't think you were so bad as this: no—didn't think it for a moment. Wouldn't have believed it if any one had told me so. But I can't stop in this room—no, not in this room. It smells of wine and orgies—and drunken dissipation—and all that kind of thing. Come, sir—lead me elsewhere, that I may speak a few words without having my nose offended—nose offended," reiterated his Majesty, applying his forefinger and thumb to his nasal promontory and holding the tip with an expression of deep disgust.

"Be pleased to walk this way, sire," said the Prince of Wales, endeavouring with all his might to steady both his legs and his ideas: but feeling that he was scarcely able to keep upon the former and that the latter were whirling in chaotic confusion, he muttered to himself, as he threw open the door by which the King had originally entered the room, "It's no use—I'm as drunk as damnation!"

"Eh!—what? what?" ejaculated his Majesty, turning sharply and suddenly round just as he was crossing the threshold: "what was that you said, sir—eh?"

"I ventured to observe, sire," answered the Prince, endeavouring to look as sober as he could,—"that our little revel deserves some extenuation."

"Ah!—ah!—yes—I caught the *ation*," cried the King, looking his son very hard in the face; "but I thought that it formed part of some other word. Well—and what excuse have you—eh?—what excuse——"

"Simply, most revered sire," returned the Prince, assuming all the vacant gravity of semi-intoxication, —"simply that those young ladies had come to sing '*God save the King!*' which we were indeed practising at the moment when your Majesty broke in upon us: and the words of the national anthem—hic—had filled us so full of loyalty, that we were obliged to drink your Majesty's health in bumpers."

"Hem! well—it may be so—it may be so," said the King, surveying the Prince suspiciously: "and I hope it is for your sake. But when I think of it, how was it that two of the girls were seated on your knees, sir—seated on your knees—eh?"

"Oh! may it please your Majesty, *that* was to show me how to beat time accurately," replied the Prince of Wales.

"Beat fiddlestick!" exclaimed the King: but not choosing to prolong this portion of the discourse, he hurried from the apartment where the orgie had taken place and accompanied his scape-grace son to another room in the splendid mansion.

Gazing around him as he took the seat which the Prince officiously placed for his accommodation, the King's eye was speedily offended by certain pictures and statues which ornamented the apartment, and which, without being absolutely indelicate, might certainly have been more decent.

"Hey-dey!" exclaimed his Majesty: "am I in Carlton House—or in a luxurious brothel? 'Pon my word, George, your taste is very vicious—very vicious indeed. What means that naked woman there in the great picture between the windows—eh, sir? Come—speak!"

"It is Venus rising from the ocean, my dear father," answered the Prince of Wales; "and it is considered a perfect master-piece."

"Master-piece, indeed!—master fiddlestick!" ex-

claimed his Majesty. "But there's another—more indelicate still——"

"Helen and Paris, sire," said the Prince, explaining the subject of this second picture against which the King levelled his objections. "Really your Majesty must be aware—hic—that there's nothing indecent or improper in the ancient classics, any more than there is in the Bible. Boys at school read about Jupiter's amours with Europa, and Semele, and Leda, just the same as both boys and girls read the story of Lot and his daughters in the Old Testament——"

"Silence, sirrah!—silence!" ejaculated the King, his puffy cheeks flushing with anger. "I know that you are a voluptuary—a seducer—a gambler—a spendthrift—and a drunkard: but I hope that you are not an infidel likewise."

"Upon my word," said the Prince, his own countenance glowing with a crimson deeper than even that which the wine had painted upon it,—"your Majesty is highly complimentary. This is the first time your Majesty has deigned for some years to set foot within my humble dwelling: and if your Majesty has nothing more pleasing to communicate than to call me a parcel of hard names, I hope that your Majesty's visits will henceforth cease altogether."

"Eh?—what—what? *This* to me!" ejaculated the monarch, starting from his seat, and surveying his son with mingled amazement and anger.

"To you—or to any one else who unprovokedly insults me," said the Prince of Wales, with that dogged, sullen firmness which so frequently characterises a state of semi-ebriety.

"I give you two minutes to withdraw your expressions, sirrah," exclaimed the King.

"I wouldn't give two damns to withdraw them at all," observed the Prince, flinging upon his father a look of mingled defiance and contempt.

"You will repent of this when you're sober, sir—you'll repent of it, I tell you," cried the King, profoundly irritated. "Such ingratitude, after all I've done for you ——"

"All you've done for me!" echoed his Royal Highness, drawing himself up to his full height and becoming almost completely sobered by the reflections which that reproach forced upon his mind. "Let us examine for an instant all the wonderful obligations under which I lie towards your Majesty. In the first place, my debts have been paid several times, it is true: but with what?"

"With what!" exclaimed George III. "Why—with money, to be sure."

"Yes—the people's money," retorted the Prince. "Not yours—you haven't a farthing of your own in the whole world. It is all very well *out-of-doors* to let the world and the newspapers talk of the Sovereign's bounty, and such like nonsense: the throne can only be sustained by humbug of that kind. But, *in doors*, between you and me, my dear father," added the Prince, with a tone and manner of bitter satire,—"there cannot be a more miserable mockery than for *you* to vapour and boast of giving away the coin wrung from the very vitals of an over-taxed, oppressed, and wonderfully enduring nation. So much for the money part of the question. As for the moral——"

"Do you mean to affirm, sirrah," exclaimed his Majesty, foaming with rage, "that I have ever set you a bad example?"

"I cannot say that your Majesty has done *that*," returned the Prince: "but *this* I will proclaim—that my education was as wretchedly narrow, defective, and circumscribed——"

"Enough! enough!" cried the King. "We shall have you announcing yourself as a Republican next, and throwing off all allegiance——"

"By heaven! if every one in the country knew as much of the humbug of monarchy as you and I, my dear father," exclaimed the Prince of Wales,—"there would be nothing else but Republicans. But there's no fear of my proclaiming myself a democrat. No—no: I *wish* to reign as a King—I *mean* to reign as a King—and I will show the English people that I look upon them as having been made to become the slaves and ministers of my pleasures. Yes—since they will have Kings, by heaven! they shall have a true King in me,—one who will grind them down with taxes—trample upon them—spurn them—treat them as lickspittles and menials——"

"You are my own son, after all!" exclaimed his Majesty, considerably softened by these evidences of a due appreciation of regal duties and royal attributes. "The people must be coerced—never conciliated. Once grant them an inch—and they will soon require an ell. If they ask for reform—give them grape-shot: if they meet to demand a redress of grievances—disperse them at the point of the bayonet. The idea that a Sovereign can reign in the hearts of his people, is nonsense. He is their natural oppressor; and they can only be ruled by being made to regard the throne as something powerful, grand, awe-inspiring, and terrible. A madman alone would preach the possibility of making it loveable."

And, gasping with the exertion of having thus made one of the only connected and fluent speeches which he ever delivered in his life, the King resumed the seat whence he had started in a rage a few minutes previously.

"Well," said the Prince of Wales, "I am delighted to think that the little breeze which just now arose between us, has lulled into a calm. The truth is, my dear father, I have the highest respect for you when you don't call me names: because there's something particularly ignominious in applying harsh terms to the heir-apparent to the throne. Moreover, at this present instant I have some claims on your Majesty's favour and consideration—inasmuch as I have consented to give my hand to Caroline of Brunswick, and have already sent Mrs. Fitzherbert about her business——"

"Then it is true that this lady has left you?" interrupted George III, joyfully. "Well—I'm glad of it. Very beautiful, no doubt—but a Catholic, George—a Catholic! Always remember to keep up the idea that this is a Protestant throne—Protestant throne. 'Tis the only safeguard of the House of Hanover—mind *that!* But what were we talking about? Oh! Mrs. Fitzherbert! Well—you've got rid of her—and I congratulate you. Your mother congratulates you, too: she is well pleased—very well pleased. Pitt told us of it a day or two ago—and that is what induced me to visit you personally this morning. While Mrs. Fitzherbert was beneath your roof, I could not cross the threshold. But now circumstances are altered—much altered. When I came just now—quite *incog.*, mind—I would not allow myself to be introduced with any state or ceremony. '*Conduct me direct*,' I said, '*into the presence of the Prince*:'—and I was thinking what

a joyful surprise it would be for you, when that lewd scene burst upon my eyes. Oh! fie, George—I am sorry to have received such evidence—unmistakable evidence—of the vicious courses which you pursue."

"Are we to return, sire, to unpleasant subjects?" demanded his Royal Highness, in a cold tone.

"Eh!—what? Unpleasant subjects!" echoed his Majesty. "No—certainly not—very far from it. Come—there's my hand, George—let the past be forgotten—quite forgotton. I won't even reproach you for all that took place at the Castle the other day, when your friend Beagles or Deagles——"

"Meagles," correctively suggested the Prince.

"Well—Meagles, then—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated his Majesty: "but, as I was saying, we won't even touch upon that topic. We will turn over a new leaf—a new leaf—an entirely new leaf. You're going to be married—and you must become steady. And to show you that you really have an indulgent father, in spite of——but no matter—let by-gones be by-gones——I was about to observe, to convince you that I will do all I can to please you when you merit my favour, that in the course of three or four days Mr. Clarendon will receive an intimation——"

"Ah! I am glad that this affair has not been neglected!" exclaimed the Prince.

"Neglected—no!" cried his Majesty. "I passed my word to your friend Mr. Meagles—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated the King, dwelling with a species of childish pleasure upon the name. "Let me see—to-day 's Wednesday—Wednesday. Well—next Saturday—but not before, mind—you may cause it to be intimated to Mr. Clarendon that the offer of a peerage and a pension which he will receive on that same morning is a consideration——"

"I understand you, my dear father—and I thank you," interrupted his Royal Highness. "Shall I now order luncheon to be served up?" he asked, by way of putting an end to a conversation which was growing especially tedious to him.

"No—I must take my departure," responded the King, rising from his seat. "And now, my dear son," he added, his voice suddenly assuming a solemn tone,—"let me beseech you to be circumspect in your conduct. You are about to enter the matrimonial sphere—and the eyes of the nation are upon you. Lord Malmesbury is about to set off for Germany in order to escort the Princess Caroline to England. The portrait of her Serene Highness will be sent to you in a few days——"

"My dear father, I beg of you to abandon this topic—at least for the present," interrupted the Prince of Wales, with an emphasis that was marked and resolute even to sternness. "Were the Princess Caroline of Brunswick as beautiful as an angel, I could not look upon myself in any other light than as a man sacrificed to the most deplorable exigencies. My debts—the cruel necessity of a Prince of the Blood espousing a foreign Princess, instead of a British subject—and the circumstance that this alliance is a merely conventional one in which the hands and not the hearts are joined,—all these circumstances afflict me cruelly. Indeed, I cannot bear to think of the marriage which has been planned for me—and there are times when I recoil from the idea as if it were a hideous spectre haunting my imagination. I consent to the sacrifice," added his Royal Highness, laconically: "but let us not talk of it."

"Be it as you will, my dear son," observed his Majesty: and, wringing the Prince's hand with some degree of emotion, he took his departure without uttering another word.

The Prince of Wales paced the room in an agitated manner for some minutes after his royal father had left him: then, suddenly making a strong effort to throw off the gloomy ideas which had stolen upon him, he rang the bell violently.

Germain, the faithful and discreet French valet, instantly answered the summons.

"Are the ballet-dancers gone?" demanded the Prince.

"They departed immediately after the arrival of his Majesty," was the response.

"I am sorry for that!" muttered the heir-apparent to himself: "their presence would have banished the care which now weighs, I know not why, upon my soul."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Germain, "a young lady, whom I have shown to the Red Drawing-Room, solicits an interview."

"A young lady!" echoed the Prince. "Of course she gave you her name?"

The valet handed his master a card.

"Miss Clarendon!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, glancing at the name which it bore: then, after a moment's hesitation, he said, "Hasten and announce that I will be with her in ten minutes."

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE VICTIM OF THE ROYAL LOVER.

The Prince of Wales repaired to his own private apartment, where he at once adopted the most approved measures to restore himself to a state of complete sobriety: for it struck him as something criminal—indeed, he reflected that it would be adding a flagrant insult to an irreparable injury, were he to appear half-intoxicated in the presence of that wronged and beauteous creature whose image still retained a certain influence over his heart.

Having drunk a bottle of soda-water, he twisted a wet towel round his head, and then entered the warm bath. Issuing thence considerably refreshed, he summoned Germain, and by the aid of this skilful dependant, soon completed his toilette.

His countenance was slightly flushed—but it seemed rather the animation of mental excitement than the effects of wine; and though his brain still felt somewhat heated, he did not regret this circumstance, inasmuch as it inspired him with a bastard courage to encounter the lovely girl whom he had undone.

Taking a last look at himself in the full length mirror, and feeling well satisfied with his appearance, the Prince of Wales repaired slowly to the drawing-room to which Octavia had been shown. Yes—slowly did he proceed thither: for, in spite of the feverish hardihood that animated him, he experienced a certain dread, as if his soul quailed and his heart quaked at the idea of in a few moments finding himself face to face with the confiding young woman whom he had made the victim of so black a treachery.

But at length he reached the door: for a few

moments he hesitated to open it. What could he say in justification of his conduct ?—what hope could he give her? How were they to meet?—and how were they to part? Would she use menaces with the view of coercing—or prayers for the purpose of melting his soul? It was impossible to say: conjecture was defied—the imagination was set at naught on all those points;—and even while the Prince of Wales thus tarried a quarter of a minute at the door, his suspense became aroused to an almost torturing degree.

With a desperate effort over his apprehensions, he entered the room; and, closing the door carefully behind him, he advanced towards the place where Octavia Clarendon was seated.

Her face was not immediately turned towards him: it was averted—and her head was bent downward. His eyes swept her form, the attitude of which indicated a profound grief; and a sharp pang—the sudden paroxysm of remorse—shot through the heart of the Prince with the lancinating effect of a barbed arrow. He stood still at the distance of a dozen paces from his victim—and he contemplated the exquisite beauty of her figure with looks, not of lust—but of compassion. Slowly she turned her head: her eyes met his—her countenance was revealed to him,—not in the radiant glory of those sunny smiles which were wont to greet him,—but with an expression so full of sorrow—so woe-begone, that the adder of remorse inflicted a deeper and sharper sting upon his soul.

"Dearest Octavia," he said, hastening towards her and throwing himself upon his knees at her feet,—"I know that you mean to upbraid me—I know that I merit your reproaches! But is there no chance of forgiveness—no hope of pardon?" he asked, in a voice that was deep and tremulous, as if moved by the saddest music that ever hymned the dirge of passion in the human soul.

"O God! what reply can I make?" ejaculated Octavia, suddenly wringing her hands in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish. "I came to say so many things to you—and now that I am here, all my thoughts have fallen into confusion!"

"Sweetest—dearest girl, compose yourself and hear me patiently," said the Prince, seizing her hands and covering them with kisses as he still knelt at her feet. "I shall not seek to justify myself, Octavia," he continued: "for I know that I have wronged you—cruelly wronged you! But I am not the villain you may be inclined to deem me. Dazzled by your beauty—maddened by the contemplation of your image, I was not master of myself: had Satan stood before me and demanded my soul as the price of his services in rendering me the possessor of your charms, I should have yielded an assent. Yes—I, who shall one day be King of England, would have sold myself, Octavia, to the King of Hell for your sake!"

"Great heaven! talk not thus, George," exclaimed the affrighted girl, her whole frame quivering and shuddering at the awful emphasis which her seducer gave to his impiety. "It is true, then, that you *did* love me——"

"Love you, Octavia!" ejaculated the Prince, again pressing to his burning lips those fair hands which were not withdrawn. "Oh! how can you ask me whether I *did* love you, when I love you *now*—yes, at present—more devotedly, more enthusiastically than ever! The love that I bear for you, Octavia, is imperishable? The cruel mandates of an absolute sire and a tyrannical Ministry may compel me to bestow my hand upon another: but my heart will ever be thine! The mystic fires of passion burn at this moment in my soul with as strong a fervour as when I received the first virgin kiss from your lips: possession has not deadened that warmth nor mitigated that glow,—and the flame will burn on unquenchably until the end. For now my cheek mantles and my heart throbs as heretofore, when I press your dear hands to my lips; and your forgiveness for the past and promise of continued love for the future would be the crowning joy of my life—the consummation of all my earthly hope!"

"By everything sacred," exclaimed Octavia, her countenance becoming even wild in its expression—the result of emotions tensely wrung and of feelings painfully overwrought: "by everything sacred, I adjure you not to address me any more in the language of love! O God! my brain whirls—my temples burn as if through the torture of unspeakable anguish—my heart suffers the crucifixion of despair! To know that you love me, yet be unable to enjoy your love—to hear you breathe the fondest assurance in my ears, yet feel that it were a crime to give back the glowing pledges,—Oh! it is maddening—maddening!"

And, snatching—tearing her hands away from the clasp in which his Royal Highness sought to retain them, she covered her face therewith; and the pearly tears streamed in showers between the taper fingers.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, pressing her knees in an anguish which was indeed unfeigned: "subdue this terrible grief—strive to recover some degree of tranquillity—yield not thus to the wildness of sorrow ——"

"Alas! alas! with what hope can I console myself?" cried the wretched girl, removing her hands from her countenance and bending upon her lover looks which bespoke almost a mental aberration—so terrible was her despair. "If you had told me that you loved me no longer—if you had confessed that my image dwelt no longer in your heart, I should have been less afflicted! Your neglect—your indifference—your faithlessness would have inspired me with other sentiments—more fierce and wild than poignant. But to know—to see—to feel that you do love me, George—to think how happy we might have been, were *you* only a humble gentleman, or *I* a Princess—to reflect, in fine, that no earthly felicity could have compared with our's had circumstances permitted our hands to join at the altar of God,—Oh! it is this—it is *this* that maddens me,—it is *this* that falls upon my brain like drops of molten lead—it is *this* that penetrates like red hot iron into my heart's core! Yes—the dream of love is gone—the morning of stern and terrible reality has dawned on that deep night of passion which was so delicious in its mystery: the clouds are dispersed,—and the light which truth sheds at length is reflected from a broken heart!"

And again the wretched girl gave way to the violence of a rending, tearing anguish.

The Prince sprang from his knees—threw his arms around her—drew her towards him—strained her to his breast—and poured into her ears all the language of consolation which the eloquence of a real and unfeigned grief could suggest. For this

man — usually so cold-blooded, so selfish, and so callous,—this hardened voluptuary who had scarcely experienced a pang when he allowed his myrmidon to drive Mrs. Fitzherbert from his palatial mansion, —this profligate, whose whole life was one monstrous egotism, felt his soul touched and his heart subdued by the piteous spectacle of that fair young creature's excruciating woe.

Yes—he strained her to his breast: and for a few minutes she abandoned herself so entirely to him that those caresses which he at first lavished upon her through the tenderest compassion, began to acquire the fervour of other and less chastened feelings. But, the instant that this fact burst upon her comprehension, Octavia started from his arms — tore herself from his embrace,—and, while her countenance became scarlet, her bosom palpitated, and her whole manner evinced a profound, angry agitation, she exclaimed, "My heart is breaking, George—but let me die cherishing the thought that you have loved me not with a dishonouring passion, although dishonour has been my portion!"

And, retreating a few paces from the chair which she had left, Octavia sank upon another seat.

Her bonnet had fallen off in the half-struggle which had taken place when she thus wrested herself from the arms of the Prince; and that splendid flood of auburn hair which might have formed the glory of a princess adored and worshipped as Tasso's Leonora, rolled in heavy and shining masses over her shoulders. The sunbeams, penetrating between the rich curtains that shaded the windows, appeared to mingle with those luxuriant tresses, imparting to them so fine a gloss and so golden a magnificence that the head of the fair being seemed radiant as that of an angel! Alas! alas! though the glory still circled the brow, yet was the angel fallen; and though heaven's own blessed light still shone around the head, yet had the heart changed into the dross of earth. The serpent had looked in upon the Eden of her heart—had found its flowers rich in perfume and bright in hue—and had changed that fair paradise into desolation. The tempter had taught her to contemplate Love as the rose of the soul: she had plucked it from its stem—she had pressed it to her bosom—and the hidden thorn had pierced deep into her heart!

And now, as the Prince gazed upon her—while she arranged that flood of glorious hair which swept over her shoulders—he felt that he could not lose a mistress so transcendently beautiful: nay—he even felt that he loved her more than he had ever yet loved a woman in all his life.

"Octavia—sweet Octavia," he said, after a long pause—and, as he spoke, he gradually advanced close up to her,—"talk not of a breaking heart, I implore you! There are two persons in this room: and think you that there is only one heart which is afflicted? By heavens, you do me an injustice!" he exclaimed, in an impassioned tone, as he seized Octavia's right hand and clasped it forcibly.

"Oh! your sufferings, George, are light and tolerable indeed when compared with mine," said the unhappy girl, with an expression of hopeless misery in her deep blue eyes and on her exquisitely chiselled lip. "When affliction falls upon the heads of two persons who love tenderly, 'tis the fate of the weaker to bear the heavier load; and if the sacrifice of a broken heart be demanded, 'tis poor woman's invariable doom to become the victim. Yes—all the wretchedness as well as all the dishonour must be borne by her! Blasted with the lightnings of her passion, she is stricken into an early grave! Oh! these are truths to which Man cannot close his eyes," exclaimed Octavia, with an agonised intonation that betrayed all the poignancy of her anguish: "and yet does he persecute Woman with his unlawful love! Why did you make me your victim?" she demanded, with an abruptness that was wild and almost fierce: "wherefore did you pour into my soul the poison of your own passion? You found me gay, and happy, and smiling—contented and innocent—an untutored creature seeking not the terrible experience of love: and what have you made me?—to what have you reduced me? Where is the hope of my youth? Shivered, like glass, into a thousand pieces that now reflect, whichever way I turn, the hideous image of despair! Restore me to that pedestal of innocence whence you have dragged me down—give me back mine honour! You are a Prince—the son of a King—one day to be a King yourself—and you have power to do more than ordinary mortals: else is your rank a mockery —your might a delusion! Prove yourself as great as the world believes you to be," exclaimed the wretched girl, starting from her seat—half-maddened by the excitement of her over-wrought feelings: "release me from the spells wherewith you have enchanted me—raise the terrible incantation that rests upon me ——"

"Octavia—Octavia!" cried the Prince, in a tone which appeared to have caught the infection of her wildness—for the fear that her senses were abandoning her had driven him almost to despair: "I implore you—by everything sacred, I conjure you to tranquillise yourself!"

"Oh! 'tis so easy for you to preach tranquillity," she exclaimed, bitterly,—"you who suffer so lightly! But the time may come, however," she added, with a strange abruptness and an expression of countenance that seriously alarmed the Prince,—"the time may come when remorse shall touch your soul—when the worm of compunction shall gnaw your heart;—and then, although your sovereign rank may gild your agonies, yet shall the memory of the poor girl whose love you won and whose heart you broke, return again and again to torture you when stretched upon a restless couch you court slumber in vain, and when no eye sees you save His from whose presence no man can fly!"

"Octavia! you are killing yourself with excitement," cried the Prince: "and you are driving me to desperation! What means this change of humour?—why reproach me *now?* Scarcely ten minutes have elapsed since you were almost happy in the conviction that my heart is thine—indissolubly thine——"

"No—no—I was not happy!" she exclaimed, struggling to release her hands from the grasp in which her royal lover again held them. "And if I were, it was criminal on my part to be so! For new ideas spring up every moment in my mind—new intuitions give an impulse to my thoughts. The walls of this room are dissolving into thin air," she continued, stretching out her arms wildly and glaring with terrible excitement around: "the world without becomes revealed to me—the whole earth develops itself to my experience—the human heart is opened to my penetration——"

"Merciful God—she is raving!" cried the Prince,

gazing upon Octavia Clarendon with looks wherein anguish was blended with terror and dismay.

"Nothing now is unknown to me—not a secret is hidden!" she continued, with rapid utterance and fierce gesticulation—while her hair, dishevelled again and flowing over her shoulders, gave her the air of a Pythoness. "A film has fallen from my eyes—a veil has been withdrawn from my mind. I can read my own heart—and I understand yours. I am the victim—and you triumph——"

"Octavia! Octavia!" ejaculated the Prince, seizing her in his arms and endeavouring to stifle her maniac words with kisses.

"Release me!" she screamed, struggling violently. "Your breath is hot—'tis a serpent's venom——"

"Silence!—in the name of God, silence!" cried his Royal Highness, still retaining her in his arms. "You will alarm the house——"

"I care not!" screamed the wretched girl. "Release me, I say——"

"Suffer me to bear you to the sofa—lie down and compose yourself——"

"No—ten thousand times no!" she shrieked, her voice becoming frantic and her struggles desperate.

"My God! do you think that I will hurt you?" exclaimed the Prince, driven to despair.

"Yes—you are a serpent—your coils environ me!"—and a piercing, rending, thrilling scream burst from her lips, as she broke away from his Royal Highness.

Madly she rushed towards the door—it opened violently just as she was within three paces of it—and several of the Prince's dependants burst into the room.

"Let me go!—let me pass!" shrieked Octavia, possessed by heaven only knows what dreadful hallucination.

"Stop her!" thundered the Prince: "I command you to stop her!"

The door was closed instantaneously—and Octavia was seized upon by the servants.

For a few moments she stood still and mute as a statue—and it seemed as if the large blue eyes that now gazed so vacantly upon his Royal Highness, were fixed for ever: but the instant that he began to approach in order to sooth and tranquillise her, she gave a sudden start—burst from the dependants who held her—and threw up her arms wildly.

The menials seized upon her again; her countenance grew abruptly distorted with a frantic expression—and a terrible laugh which pealed from her lips spoke out the appalling truth.

Octavia Clarendon was a maniac!

CHAPTER XCV.

THE LOVES OF THE PRINCESSES.

While this painful scene was occuring at Carlton House, a conversation of an interesting character was taking place at Windsor Castle between two of the daughters of George III.

In a magnificently-furnished apartment, about which were all the scattered evidences of female tastes, the Princesses Sophia and Amelia were seated together in a window recess. A shade of pensiveness was upon the countenance of each royal lady; and in the amiable spirit of sisterly reliance and confidence, they retained each other's hand in a fond clasp.

We have already described their personal appearance; and the reader is therefore aware that they possessed a beauty of no ordinary character. Complexions more dazzlingly fair—eyes more deliciously melting—charms more luxuriant and voluptuous, it would be impossible to conceive. They were the true types of the female portion of the family of Brunswick—precocious in the development of their forms—their countenances indicating the strength of the desires which warmed their bosoms—their lips especially evincing the sensuality of their temperament—and their eyes usually swimming in a soft languor, but susceptible of being lighted up with the fires of the most impassioned ardour.

Of the two, the Princess Sophia was more essentially gross in her feelings and more thoroughly sensuous in her longings than the Princess Amelia. To the former, Love was a passion in which the appetite for gratification was stronger than the pure affection for the object: to the latter, it was a more sweet and agreeable emotion, though still voluptuous even in its refinement. But then the Princess Sophia had lost her chastity and had plunged headlong into the enjoyments of fruition—whereas the Princess Amelia was still in the possession of her virgin innocence, although her imagination was inflamed even to pruriency.

And they both loved: yes—these royal ladies experienced the influence of the tender passion as well as the meanest of mortals: but less happy, less fortunate than even the humblest, and lowest, and poorest of the sons and daughters of toil, they knew that their hands could never be bestowed where their hearts had already been given!

But let us listen to the discourse which is now taking place between them; and we shall acquire a deeper insight into the secrets which, in the confidence of a true sisterly love, they were now revealing to each other.

"I am glad, my beloved Sophia," said the Princess Amelia, who was a year younger than her sister,*—"I am glad that some secret and unaccountable impulse prompted us to open our hearts to each other this morning."

"The impulse is not unaccountable," observed the Princess Sophia, in a soft and subdued tone. "The truth is, Amelia, we yearned to exchange a mutual confidence—we felt that it would relieve our minds of a weight were we to unbosom ourselves to each other—and we have acted in obedience to the inspiration."

"Yes—you have properly defined the motive which led to all that has this morning passed between us," returned the Princess Amelia. "Alas! my poor Sophia, you are far more unhappy than I—for he whom you love is already your husband in the sight of heaven, and the father of your child——"

"Hush, dearest Amelia!" murmured the elder sister: "for heaven's sake subdue your voice to the lowest possible whisper when you allude to that tremendous secret. Oh! with burning cheeks—

* In order to suit the purposes of our narrative, we have taken a slight liberty with the age of the Princess Amelia, by making her a little older than she really was at the period (A.D. 1795) of which we are writing.

with throbbing brows—and with palpitating heart, did I throw myself into your arms, my beloved Amelia, and breathe in your ear that fatal truth which involves alike my happiness and my honour! But I do not repent having revealed that secret to you——Oh! no, my dearest sister, I do not repent—for you can now afford me your pity, your sympathy, and your consolation!"

"And I do compassionate you, Sophia—profoundly compassionate you," said the Princess Amelia, flinging her robust white arms about her sister's neck and embracing her affectionately. "In loving General Barth, you have bestowed your affections upon a man in every way worthy of them——"

"No—not in every way, Amelia," interrupted the elder sister, with an accent of bitterness marking the profound melancholy of her tone: "not in every way—for he is not a Prince!"

"Alas! is it not terrible that etiquette and cold formality should surround us as with a wall of adamant?" exclaimed the Princess Amelia: "is it not unnatural that our passions and feelings, though the same as those which animate the humblest peasant, are to be curbed by laws and statutes? Marriage to us can never be associated with the heart's feelings: it must prove nothing more than a cold ceremony—a glacial convention resulting from expediency——"

"Marriage, my sweet sister, is with *me* impossible," interrupted the Princess Sophia, subduing a sob by a great effort. "Think you that situated as I am—being a mother, and with my secret known already to several persons—I should ever dare accompany a suitor to the altar? No, dearest Amelia—it is impossible; and if our parents should seek to dispose of my hand, I would rather throw myself at their feet and confess everything than allow them to confirm any matrimonial negotiation on my behalf. But you, Amelia—you may hope——"

"No, dearest Sophia," exclaimed the younger sister; "marriage likewise becomes impossible for me! I have already told you that I love Sir Richard Stamford—and I feel that my happiness is bound up in this passion which has obtained such speedy, prompt, and despotic empire over my soul. Only one week has elapsed since we first encountered each other under circumstances so strange—so remarkable;—and since then we have met every day," added the Princess, concealing her blushing countenance in Sophia's bosom. "His misfortunes had already engendered a profound sympathy in my heart, even before I ever beheld him; and I was therefore prepared to love him tenderly and well."

"And he knows not that you love him thus?" said the Princess Sophia, interrogatively.

"He may perhaps conjecture that such is the fact," answered Amelia: "but no avowal of the state of my feelings has issued from my lips. Oh! no—it were indelicate in the extreme to give utterance to a word calculated to reveal all I experience for him! Our acquaintance has been so short—and he is so profoundly absorbed in the contemplation of those misfortunes which have fallen upon his head——"

"And yet he must conceive it to be strange that you have thus met him daily since the morning when you first became personally known to each other?"

"Alas! I am well aware that my conduct is imprudent in the extreme," said the Princess Amelia, her superb bosom heaving with a profound sigh: "nay, more—he may even look upon it as unmaidenly—undignified—improper! But I must submit to any opinion which he may form, however derogatory—for I feel that I love him more than my own life. He is handsomer, if possible, than our eldest brother, whom he so much resembles; and his sorrows have invested his countenance with a shade of pensiveness which give an ineffable attraction to the perfect manly beauty of his features. His voice is soft and touching, without losing its proper masculine intonation: his form is finely proportioned;—and his manners are more than polished and agreeable—they are absolutely winning. How, then, can I be blamed for loving one who is in every way so worthy of an attachment the most devoted—the most sincere—the most fervent that woman's heart is capable of bestowing?"

"I do not blame you, my sweet sister," murmured the Princess Sophia: "heaven knows that I have neither the inclination nor the right to reproach you. On the contrary, I deeply sympathise with you. But beware, Amelia—beware, dear girl," continued the elder lady, now blushing deeply in her turn,—"lest your love betray you into frailty, and your lot should become as unhappy as mine!"

"Sophia," answered the young Princess, in a tone so melting and tremulous that it was scarcely audible,—"I have reflected well upon all the probable consequences of this love which I have formed—and I am prepared to make any sacrifice and incur any risk, rather than surrender an attachment in which my earthly happiness is so deeply involved. If my only chance of safety be in refusing to meet Sir Richard Stamford any more, assuredly I shall not adopt that course."

"And yet you know not whether your love be reciprocated, my dearest sister?" observed the Princess Sophia, gazing fondly on the blushing countenance of the charming and infatuated Amelia.

"I have already told you," she replied, "that he is absorbed in the misfortunes which have overtaken him. But on each occasion that we meet, he listens with a more evident pleasure to the words of solace which I pour into his ears: he calls me his good genius—his kind angel;—and he begins to acknowledge that there is yet hope for him in this world. Ah! my dearest Sophia, you must not suppose that this love of mine can fail to touch a reciprocal chord in *his* heart! He welcomes me as his consoler—he already looks upon me as his best and sincerest friend—and he assures me that his heart will ever cherish the most fervent gratitude. Oh! there is something sublimely interesting in those interviews which take place between us," exclaimed the impassioned and enthusiastic Princess, her countenance glowing with animation and her eyes swimming in a liquid radiance.

"God grant that you may always speak of them in the same tone!" ejaculated the Princess Sophia. "But there are moments, dearest Amelia," she continued, her voice and manner suddenly assuming an ominous solemnity,—"when I doubt the possibility of permanent happiness for any member of our family."

"Merciful heaven!" cried the younger sister, a strong shudder convulsing her frame: "this is an echo of the same misgiving which has so often disturbed my own mind."

"And I fear that it is not altogether unfounded, Amelia," returned the Princess Sophia. "Our an-

cestors have been guilty of terrible crimes—the records of Hanover and Brunswick could make revelations that would cause the blood to run cold and the hair to bristle up in horror. The vengeance of heaven is now falling upon the present generation of our race—and an appalling sense of this truth strikes upon my heart. Oh! the millions who worship Royalty in this country, little think how unenviable are often the feelings of those whom they thus blindly adore!" added the elder sister, with a bitterness which grated terribly upon the ears of the younger lady. "And do you know," she continued, sinking her voice to the lowest audible whisper, "that I have latterly experienced devouring terrors lest that dreadful affliction——"

"Oh! our dear father's malady," interrupted the Princess Amelia, with a still more visible shudder than before: and then there was a long pause, during which these two young and royal ladies looked upon each other in dark and sinister silence.

"But let us not think of *this*—let us not meet misfortunes half-way!" suddenly exclaimed the Princess Sophia. "God who can afflict, knows likewise how to spare—and His chastisements seldom fall upon the innocent. If our father be undeserving of His wrath, he will perhaps escape a repetition of those trials to which heaven has already subjected him: but if *he* also be criminal in any respect, then may his punishment begin—or rather continue—in this world."

"Oh! let us change the conversation," cried the Princess Amelia, to whose memory rushed all the incidents of that morning when the King was compelled to yield to the demands made upon him by Meagles and the Amazon.

We should however observe that the favourite daughter of George III had not breathed to a soul a single syllable of what she overheard on that occasion;—no—not even to her sister Sophia had she revealed the strange, ominous, and mysterious

events which had thus come to her knowledge. For, although she might unbosom the sentiments and the secrets of her own soul,—yet everything regarding her sire she looked upon as solemn and sacred: and thus the Princess Sophia remained in complete ignorance of those circumstances of which the Princess Amelia had become cognizant, and which proved that some tremendous secret was associated with the destiny of England's King.

Rising from the window recess where they had remained for some time seated, and where the confidential outpourings of their hearts' mysteries had taken place, the royal sisters looked forth from the casement upon the vast range of park and pleasure-ground stretching before them.

"It is now mid-day," observed the Princess Sophia, after a long silence: and, bending her eyes significantly on the blushing countenance of her sister, she said, "Do not remain here, Amelia, only for the purpose of keeping me company. I know from all you have told me this morning, that the hour is now at hand when some one will be expecting to meet you yonder."

"Such is indeed the truth, dearest sister," murmured the younger lady, a sigh of pleasure escaping from her lips. "But you, my beloved Sophia," she exclaimed, a sudden thought striking her,—"have *you* no hope of soon beholding again the object of your affection?"

"Yes," answered the elder Princess: "a letter which I received yesterday tells me that General Barth will be in London in the course of next week—and I shall then return to St. James's palace."

"Will he not ask to be allowed to embrace his child?" inquired the Princess Amelia, gazing tenderly up into her sister's countenance.

"No—for that child can never be recognised by either of its parents," was the melancholy response.

Amelia pressed Sophia's hand in token of the sincerest sympathy—and then hurried from the apartment.

CHAPTER XCVI.

A BRITISH WORKING MAN AND HIS FAMILY.

We must now return to Camilla Morton—or rather Rose Foster: for the reader is doubtless well aware that the orphan girl had entered Mrs. Brace's establishment under the former name, which she had assumed for the reasons set forth in the letter that she had addressed to Tim Meagles.

A week had elapsed since we saw her hurrying madly along, in that vile neighbourhood which lies in the immediate vicinity of Westminster Abbey: and it will be recollected that we left her at the moment when, a vertigo seizing upon her, she sank deprived of sense upon the door-step of a house.

And where do we find her now? Let us endeavour to depict a scene which, full of harrowing details though it were, was but the type of thousands of such spectacles existing *then*, and of myriads existing *at the present day!*

In a wretched garret a small family was grouped in all those unstudied but painful attitudes which denote misery and despair.

A man, belonging to the industrious class, was seated upon a broken chair; and every lineament of a countenance naturally good-looking, but awfully care-worn, evinced the ravages of famine and the poignancy of acute mental anguish. His form, strongly built when in vigorous health, was so wasted that his poverty-stricken clothing hung loosely upon him—thus rendering him a ghastly object, piteous indeed to contemplate: for it was a being made in the image of God who was thus reduced by destitution, and want, and sorrow to that lamentable condition in which he appeared to be dying by inches.

In another part of the wretched room, a woman was suckling a babe. Suckling!—no—no—that is not the term: for the fountain of her infant's life was dried up in her bosom—and the child was pulling feebly at a withered breast. O God! what language can convey an idea of the shocking appearance of that poor mother and her innocent babe? Emaciated were they both—so emaciated that the woman seemed but the shadow of what her former self must have been—and the child lay with the lightness of a feather on her thin, fleshless arm. Her cheeks were sunken and of corpse-like paleness: her eyes were hollow, with large blue circles about them;—the colour had even fled from her lips, leaving them white as if Death had imprinted upon them the cold kiss of the tomb;—and her entire appearance was so wan—so woe-begone—so full of despair, that it seemed as if Misery had taken a human shape and had become personified in her.

The babe—the poor babe over which she bent, was about nine or ten months old: but it scarcely appeared to have numbered as many weeks. The little being was so emaciated as to be only skin and bone; and instead of having that roundness of face which usually characterises even the infant of tenderest age, its cheeks were as sunken as those of its mother. There was no vivacity in it—scarcely any motion. Dull and quiet it lay—not turning its head round every now and then at the sounds of voices—and never once experiencing the sunlight of a smile to break upon the frozen winter of its sad and cheerless infancy.

And as the starving mother bent over the famished babe, an expression of such rending despair would sweep from time to time athwart her countenance that, although her lips were silent, it was easy to read upon her features the words of agony which she kept repeating in the depths of her heart—"Holy God! what will become of thee, poor helpless child?"

Near her was a little boy of about eight years old, and with a countenance that was intended by nature to be round, ruddy, and laughing in expression. But, merciful heaven! how spirit-broken—how thin—how tortured with hunger—and how wretched he looked! Languid—exhausted—with hollow eyes in which starvation's demon glared—and shivering in the scanty clothes that hung loosely on his wasted frame, the little fellow presented a spectacle that would have drawn tears from a being of even iron heart,—aye, from the eyes of any one save a King, a Queen, an Aristocrat, or a Poor Law Commissioner!

Upon the floor of this wretched garret, another boy—about thirteen years of age—was seated, endeavouring to sooth to the best of his ability a young sister who was between six and seven. The miserable girl was crying for bread; and her brother, as famished as herself, was whispering in her ear all the fondest assurances and the brightest hopes his fancy could conjure up, but the realisation of

which he was quite old and experienced enough to doubt in the blank bitterness of his own despair!

And, leaning against the wall—pressing her hand to her throbbing, burning brow—Rose Foster was endeavouring to steady those thoughts which were excited to an agonising pitch by the contemplation of the appalling scene of misery that was before her eyes, and in which she also shared!

Misery!—merciful God, every one and everything in that garret bore the impress of misery the direst—the acutest—the most poignant that ever entered the habitations of the oppressed millions of these realms! It was a misery which knew no compunction—no remorse: a misery that was as unsparing as a tax-collector—as relentless as an overseer—as cold and implacable as a poor-law guardian. Although the weather was as chill as if that garret were surrounded by Spitzbergen ice, yet not a spark glimmered in the grate, which was black and cheerless. A candle stuck in a bottle gave forth light enough to bring into relief all the most appalling details of this scene of woe. The flickering beams, playing upon the countenances of the famished family, showed all that ghastliness of feature the wanness and anguish of which they could not possibly enhance. A few articles hung to dry upon a line stretching across the room; and the exhalation of the dampness sent a keener and more piercing chill to the marrow of those bones which had so little flesh upon them to serve as a natural barrier to the icy atmosphere.

Oh! that some great artist could have transferred to his canvass this spectacle the harrowing outlines of which no language can depict with an appropriate vividness,—that he could have drawn Misery eating into the flesh, and sucking the blood, and making its way to the very hearts of those parents and their famishing offspring,—and that, when his work was accomplished, he could have exhibited it to the assembled Royalty and Aristocracy of the country, exclaiming, "Behold a life-like representation of that appalling wretchedness and woe which emanate from *your* selfishness—*your* tyranny—*your* abhorrent cruelty!"

Almighty God! what have the millions done that they should be doomed to endure such hideous suffering in their passage from the cradle to the tomb?—and what have the favoured few done that they should revel unceasingly in all the enjoyments, luxuries, and elegances of life?

But let us continue the thread of our narrative.

The man whom we have already represented as being seated in an attitude of despair, was the head of this starving family whom we have described. The emaciated woman was his wife—the famishing children were his own. His name was Melmoth; and he was by trade a journeyman hatter. But having, at a public meeting of operatives, dared to express his political opinions with a frankness displeasing to the upholders of all the atrocious abuses which render this country a shame and a scandal in the history of civilisation, he was immediately signalised as a victim. The clergyman of the parish denounced him as a "seditious fellow"—and his employer turned him adrift at a short notice. Vainly did he apply for work elsewhere: his name was known in connexion with democratic sentiments—and, because he was independent enough to express what he thought and felt, starvation became his doom in this land which boasts its freedom, its intelligence, and its charity.

Such was the origin of Melmoth's misfortunes. Months had passed since the ban of a selfish and vitiated society had thus been placed upon him; and, although bearing an unblemished character for sobriety, honesty, and ability in his craft, he was unable to obtain employment. At first the little savings made by his frugal and excellent wife were encroached upon: these soon went—and then the superfluous raiment began to disappear. Next, the furniture was rendered available to supply the means of sustaining life;—and the little articles of comfort having been converted into bread, the necessaries followed. Day after day was the shop of the pawnbroker visited by either Melmoth or his wife; and on each occasion the barrier between their family and utter destitution grew less and less. In proportion as their worldly possessions disappeared, gaunt misery became more clearly developed in all its hideous outlines to their view. Every time a coat, or a gown, or a chair was removed from the decreasing stock, poverty grew more plainly visible. The spectral form of famine took larger proportions, in order to fill up each successive gap which the exigences of the day and the assistance of the pawnbroker made in the apparel and the furniture of this doomed family. And every mouthful of bread thus procured, was eaten with a sharper pang and moistened with more plenteous tears.

At length the dreaded moment arrived,—that moment when the four bare walls had "destitution" written in unmistakable letters upon their otherwise blank surface—when the cupboard was empty—when the bedding had all disappeared, and the shivering children slept upon a sack filled with straw—and when only a broken chair, an old chest, and a few poor rags of clothing were left! Yes—this awful moment came,—that crisis whose approach had been marked with shuddering looks and with eyes that could not be averted;—it had come—this fatal phase in the history of poverty and suffering,—and, terrible even in the distance as it had appeared, there was in its presence a reality so stern, so remorseless, so excruciating, and so thoroughly maddening, that God alone can tell what hope now sustained the wretched parents as they felt starvation themselves and beheld their children dying by inches before their eyes!

It was evening—nine o'clock in the evening, when we thus introduce the Melmoth family to our readers. The man and his wife had not tasted food for forty-eight hours: the boy of thirteen had fasted for twenty-four hours;—and the last crust—stale and scanty, heaven knows—had been divided in the morning between the younger lad and the girl. Rose Foster had passed as long a period as Melmoth and his wife without eating;—and thus every soul in that garret was hungering unto death. The man and the woman—the young lady—the three children—and the infant,—seven human beings in all,—were starving—perishing through famine—wasting away with want!

And yet these seven human beings were dwelling in a land teeming with wealth,—in a city to whose bosom the commercial navies of the world wafted the produce of the fairest climes of the earth,—yes—dwelling in this London where the luxuries of life abounded as amply as the necessaries, and where the granaries, the provision-shops, and the markets were stored with a profusion which the promptitude of supply, produce, and import, rendered inexhaustible!

These thoughts swept through the reeling, rocking, maddening brain of Melmoth, as he cast a rapid

glance around and beheld the babe feebly pulling at its mother's withered breast—the mother herself appearing the very image of despair—the boy of eight beginning to whisper, in half-frightened tone and manner, an imploring prayer for food—the little girl crying bitterly—the elder boy ceasing his attempts to sooth her because he himself was now goaded by the poignancy of famine—and Rose Foster leaning in ineffable anguish against the naked wall of the wretched, cold, and cheerless garret.

It was nine o'clock, we said—and Melmoth had not been in above a quarter of an hour. During the entire day had he sought for work—and the invariable answer, when he told his name, was a stern negative. He would have given a false name—he would have done anything short of an actual crime, in order to have been enabled to carry home hope to his destitute family: but that deceit would not have availed him—for references would have been required! And now—beggared, starving, famishing, and with this appalling spectacle of misery before his eyes—he felt for the first time in his life as if he really *could* perpetrate a crime to obtain bread for those perishing little ones!

On returning home—great God! such a home as it was!—on the evening to which we are referring, the almost maddened man had flung down his battered hat upon the trunk which once was filled with good clothes, but which now was empty; and sinking exhausted on the broken chair, he threw one glance of hopeless misery around—and then fell into the reverie of dark despair. No word escaped his lips: he had not a syllable of hope to give — and the atmosphere of that garret was already too cheerless and too redolent of woe to need the breath of his intense affliction to enhance its bitterness. The moment the door had opened, his wife threw one searching, inquiring look upon him: but she read the answer in his countenance—and, with a bursting heart, she bent down her eyes again upon the wan, thin face of the famished babe that lay so lightly on her arm.

Thus a quarter of an hour passed—and not a word was spoken in that habitation of misery.

At length Rose Foster appeared suddenly to receive the inspiration of some hope or to make up her mind to some particular course; and, advancing towards the unhappy man, she laid her hand upon his shoulder, saying, "Mr. Melmoth, *this* cannot continue: happen what may, I am determined to go at once and appeal to the bounty of Mr. Meagles."

As these words, uttered in a tone combining firmness with deep pathos, fell upon the ears of the working man who had no work to do, he raised his eyes with an expression of thankfulness—as much as to say, "Yes -go, I implore you:"—but when he beheld that countenance of soft and touching beauty, and marked the air of virgin innocence which characterised the maiden, he relented from his own selfishness—and, desperate as the emergency was, he said, "No, Miss—I cannot consent to your adopting a course which may lead to your ruin."

"But perhaps you are deceived in Mr. Meagles," she urged, timidly.

"I know, as I have already told you, Miss, that he is the boon companion of the Prince, and panders to all his most detestable vices," responded Melmoth. "This is notorious, young lady—and I cannot be so thoroughly heartless and selfish as to let you run headlong into ruin and disgrace."

"No—we will perish sooner than be the means of having a hair of your head injured," observed Mrs. Melmoth, in a tone naturally soft and pleasing, but which want and misery had rendered weak, plaintive, and tremulous.

"Oh! it grieves me to the soul," exclaimed the young maiden, tears streaming down her cheeks,—"to think that people possessed of hearts so excellent as yours, should be plunged into such an abyss of misery. It is my duty—my bounden duty to do all I can—yes, and dare every peril that may spring up in my path, so long as there is the slightest chance of procuring bread for these poor children! Think you, my dear friends, that I am unmindful of all you have done for me? Oh! no—no," she cried, with the enthusiasm of a fervent gratitude; "if years and years had passed since *you*, Mr. Melmoth, first brought me hither—yes, if many years instead of a few days had passed since *then*—my memory would remain equally vivid and my thankfulness equally sincere."

"Would to God I had the means of assisting you substantially, dear young lady!" ejaculated Melmoth, clasping his hands in the bitterness of his mental anguish. "What I have done for you is nothing. I found you senseless upon the door-step of this house——"

"And while the landlady and the other lodgers reproached you for paying any attention to a mere stranger," interjected Rose emphatically,—"your excellent heart would not permit you to be deterred from performing an act of generosity—of charity—of benevolence."

"Do not speak of it, young lady," said Mrs. Melmoth. "My husband was incapable of deserting or neglecting a fellow-creature whom he found in such a condition: and when you told us your artless tale and it appeared by the description you gave of the Mr. Harley who persecuted you that he could be none other than the Prince of Wales——"

"Yes," ejaculated Melmoth, starting from his seat in an excited manner and gesticulating fiercely,—"when we found that you were a good and innocent girl who had escaped from the snares of the Prince only to fall into the hands of a gang of robbers who plundered you of all you possessed—and when we thus ascertained that you were the victim of those circumstances which resulted from the vile persecution that he had attempted against you—we were more than ever resolved to protect you to the last. For it is the countenance and support of bad Kings and Princes that enable the Aristocracy to tyrannise over the people; and the middle classes especially, catching the terrible infection of despotism and selfishness from the grade above them, grind us poor working men down to the very dust. But what are you thinking of doing, Miss?" demanded Melmoth abruptly, as he saw that Rose was putting on her bonnet.

"Grant me your patience for one moment," said the gentle maiden. "Seven days ago you found me senseless in the street—upon the door-step of this house. You rendered me assistance—you left me not to perish unaided there, as the heartless landlady and the other lodgers would have done—but, though crushed to the earth by the weight of your own afflictions, you nevertheless bestowed your sympathy upon me. Your excellent wife joined you in this

benevolence—she shared in the generosity of the deed. I told you my tale without reserve—and you believed me at once. I might have been a designing, artful girl—and then how your confidence would have been misplaced! But your own good hearts prompted you both to put faith in the poor friendless stranger—and you bade me remain with you. Nay, more—you even persuaded the landlady of the house to grant me a lodging until I could obtain needle-work and pay her——"

"And that work, my dear young lady, you have been, alas! unable to procure," said Mrs. Melmoth, in a voice that was broken by deep sobs. "Would to God that you had succeeded, for your own sake! But heaven alone knows what is to become of us all!" she added, as she threw a glance of despair upon the babe that was now moaning with a low and subdued plaintiveness in her arms.

"I was about to tell you what is to become of us," exclaimed Rose, emphatically. "We must obtain bread—bread, at any risk—at any sacrifice—bread for those dear children at least, if not for ourselves! And if I recapitulated all that you have done for me, my good friends, it is merely to convince you that I am mindful of your generosity——"

"Generosity!" repeated Melmoth, bitterly but not sarcastically: "we had nothing to give!"

"Yes—I have eaten at your expense—I have obtained a lodging on your credit—I should have been a houseless, starving, unfriended wanderer without you," said Rose, with a voice and manner of fervid gratefulness; "and I cannot see your children perish before your eyes without making an effort to save them. Despite, therefore, of all you have told me concerning this Mr. Meagles, I will hasten to him—I will throw myself at his feet—I will implore him to succour you——"

"God bless you, Miss Foster!" cried Melmoth, grasping both her hands and pressing them forcibly in his own: "God bless you, dear young lady—but this must not be! You will only run into the snares of your enemies—you will be delivered over to the Prince——"

"I cannot think that Mr. Meagles is capable of such treachery!" said Rose, interrupting the journeyman hatter. "I have already explained to you the circumstances under which I formed his acquaintance — the kindness which he then manifested towards me—the assistance he rendered—the delicate attentions he paid me——"

"Be assured, Miss Foster, that the blackest treachery lurked at the bottom of all that seeming friendship," interrupted Melmoth. "He saw that you were beautiful, innocent, and artless——"

At this moment the door was flung violently open; and a short, thin, hatchet-faced woman, with a very vixenish look, made her appearance upon the threshold. The young maiden shrank back in alarm—for she was instantly seized with a presentiment of the coming storm; and the children, terrified by the abrupt and unceremonious manner of the woman's entrance, huddled together and began to cry in mournful concert.

"Mrs. Thomas," said Melmoth, adopting as conciliatory a tone as possible, "I am well aware for what purpose you have come——"

"Then pay me, if you please," interrupted the landlady—for such the woman was: "pay me, if you please," she repeated, in that sharp, shrill, penetrating voice which usually belongs to the character of a vixen.

"I must request your patience a little longer. Mrs. Thomas," returned the unhappy man, in an imploring tone. "You see that I have been unable to obtain work for the present——"

"And never will!" cried the landlady, her voice swelling into a screech. "They say you've ruined yourself by spouting at public meetings and so on—and the hat manufacturers looks on you with suspicion. They think you'll raise a mob and burn their houses down—and so they wont have nothink to do with you."

"Let us hope, Mrs. Thomas, that things will not continue quite so bad as all this," said Melmoth. "It is perfectly true that I have experienced a great deal of cruel persecution on account of my political opinions: but surely—surely," he added, in a tone of deep feeling, "this unjust prejudice must wear away sooner or later."

"Sooner or later indeed!" shrieked forth the landlady, now worked, or rather having worked herself up to a high pitch of irritability. "And am I to wait till doomsday for my rent, I should like to know. Here's twenty-six shillings doo from you—and half-a-crown the week's rent for this young woman here—and not a sixpence forthcoming, as far as I can see."

"God knows it is too true!" murmured the unhappy man, turning aside and covering his face with his hands.

At the sight of their father's grief, the wailing of the children became piteous in the extreme. Mrs. Melmoth, rising up with her babe in her arms, endeavoured to say something to pacify the landlady: but anguish choked her utterance—for when she was about to implore the woman's forbearance until the morrow, the sickening conviction rushed to her mind that there was not a single hope left.

"Mrs. Thomas," said Rose Foster, accosting the landlady, whom her sweet tone and manner somewhat mollified for a moment: "I beseech you to grant an hour's delay before you adopt any harsh measure towards this worthy but most unhappy family. Late though it now is, I am going to see a friend——"

"Ah! a friend indeed—I've no doubt of it," observed the landlady, throwing a sudden glance of cruel suspicion upon Miss Foster. "But howsomever—it doesn't matter to me where the money comes from, so long as it does come——"

"Do not insult this young lady," exclaimed Melmoth, turning abruptly and sternly round upon the unfeeling vixen: "her conduct is above suspicion!"

"Oh! well—I dare say you will answer for her good behaviour and become bail for her character as you have for her rent," cried the landlady. "But them as bails ought to be substaunshal——"

"One hour—only one hour—and everything shall be paid!" exclaimed Rose, writhing under the insult which the woman had so heartlessly levelled at her: and, having thus spoken, she hurried from the room.

There was a pause of nearly a minute, during which Melmoth remained uncertain whether to hasten after her and fetch her back, or whether he should allow her to run the risk which he feared she would encounter in paying a visit to Tim Meagles. But while he was wavering between two

opposite impulses, the echoes of her light feet descending the stairs rapidly grew fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. And still he remained motionless in the room—his desperate condition prompting him to suffer the young maiden to put to the test the only alternative to which hope could possibly point.

"Well, I tell you what it is, Mr. Melmoth," said the landlady, breaking silence at the expiration of a minute: "that Miss Foster has gone away to raise money somehow or another—and of course I'm not obleeged to know or care by what means. It's just half-past nine o'clock—and I don't mind waiting till eleven. My 'usband wont be home till then—and so I've got to set up for him. But if so be the cash isn't forthcoming by that hour, you and your family must all tramp off this very night; and if you wont go by fair means, I shall make free to send for the constable and turn you out by foul. So the matter stands in that there way betwixt us."

Having thus spoken, and without waiting for a reply, Mrs. Thomas hurried down stairs.

Melmoth closed the door behind her, and, turning towards his wife, he read despair in the countenance of the unhappy woman as she sank back on the low seat whence she had risen a few minutes previously.

"Holy God! what is to become of us?" exclaimed the wretched man, dashing his clenched fists with terrible violence against his forehead, so that the blows sounded as plainly as if they had been dealt upon the table.

"James—my dearest James, tranquillise yourself!" almost screamed forth his heart-broken wife, now cruelly alarmed by the dreadful excitement to which misery had goaded her husband.

And the children, gathering round their father, clung to his clothes—weeping bitterly, and gazing up in mingled piteousness and alarm towards the countenance which wore an expression alike strange and menacing, and such as had never been observed upon those features until then.

CHAPTER XCVII.

DESPERATION.

For some minutes the persecuted working man remained standing, drawn up to his full height, in the midst of his children. His left hand was thrust into his breast—his right was clenched—and his whole frame shook with nervous tremblings. Terrible thoughts appeared to sweep across his countenance—and his wife, who was a shrewd and intelligent woman, was seized with the sudden fear that some desperate project was springing up in her husband's imagination or that his mind was undergoing a fearful change, the transition convulsing his whole being.

The little boy of eight clung to him on one side—the little girl on the other—and the elder lad stood before him, beseeching that he would be comforted.

But the man stared wildly upon them; and the more sinister grew the workings of his features, the deeper became the impression in the bosom of his unhappy wife that he was revolving some plan the nature of which she shuddered to conjecture.

"James," she said at length—once more rising from her seat, and approaching him with the babe in her arms—that babe which was giving forth a weak, plaintive cry, as if the hand of death were already weighing heavily upon its frail and emaciated form,—"James—my dear husband—in the name of God! look not thus upon your children! See — they are terrified — your manner alarms them. What ails you?—what are you thinking of? Speak—I implore you to speak!"

"Father—dear father—speak!" murmured the elder boy, joining his thin and wasted hands in earnest appeal.

"What am I thinking of?" he exclaimed, with the wildness and the bitterness of a maniac, his eyes glaring almost savagely as he spoke: and so terribly threatening did his voice sound that the cries of the children, all save the infant, were immediately hushed—and they gazed with mingled awe and apprehension upon the parent who had never seemed harsh nor unkind to them before. "What am I thinking of?" he repeated—and again the unnatural laughter sounded dread and ominous within the four bare walls of the dismantled, denuded garret. "I am thinking," he proceeded in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "that it is useless to let society make war upon us any longer without the slightest attempt at retaliation! I am thinking that I am a coward—a sneaking, paltry, mean, despicable coward—to submit to a diabolical persecution and offer no enmity in return! I am thinking that a civilised society has no right to hunt any of its members to death—nor to goad them to desperation: if it do, it must take the consequences! I am thinking that honesty amounts to a crime when my wife and children are starving around me and an unfeeling landlady threatens to have us turned forth into the streets;—and I begin to look upon myself as a craven-spirited, pusillanimous, degraded wretch who wants the courage to seize upon those rights which a vitiated system denies him. God never placed us in this world to starve: *He* could not have sent these innocent children upon earth to endure all the agonies of that lingering death which famine is inflicting. No—no: it is impossible! We have a right to live—and it was intended that we *should* live, because we were not put upon the earth by our own wish! We did not ask to be born. If we did, then might we be punished for our presumption: but it is not our own fault that we are here;—and since God is good and wise, *He* would not have called us into being merely to leave us in the position of intruders upon the rest of the world. No—I begin to understand things in a new light. We have a right to receive a subsistence from the earth, inasmuch as we have been placed upon it by God himself: and if this subsistence be denied to us—if work be refused when we ask for work—if the bread of industry be withholden, then must we take what is not granted!"

"In the name of heaven, James, cease this dreadful language!" cried the wretched woman, whose powers of utterance had been totally suspended for a few minutes while her husband was thus giving vent to the doctrines which, like new intuitions, had sprung up in his mind as suddenly and with all the vividness of the lightning that awes while it dazzles and is terrible in its grandeur.

"Dreadful language!" repeated Melmoth, bending upon his quailing, shrinking wife a look that

was even ferocious. "By the living God!" he exclaimed, in a tone of wild exultation—his eyes flashing fire, his nostrils dilating, and his whole form appearing to expand into the dignity of god-like proportions; so that this son of toil—this man of the people—this obscure and starving mechanic became an object terrible to gaze upon in the glory of his wrath and the sublimity of his indignation:—"by the living God!" he cried, "I will submit to all these wrongs no more! Patience is exhausted—and endurance has reached that point when it becomes a crime! Whence are we to obtain food save from those who have self-appropriated the fruits of the earth? Who shall dare tell me that starvation is a doom for which we have no right to reproach our fellow-creatures? Against whom, then, must our reproaches be levelled? Not against the Almighty——Oh! no—we cannot perpetrate such a tremendous impiety nor give utterance to such an appalling blasphemy! And yet, since the earth yields enough to maintain all who are upon it, there is a diabolical injustice somewhere when a whole family is perishing through want. Tell me then, wife—you who say that my language is dreadful—tell me in which direction we are to look for the fountain of that injustice. I have already said that we dare not complain against God: and therefore we must accuse Man. Yes—the favoured few are our enemies—the oligarchy are our foes. The bread which by right belongs to my children is now in the mansions of the rich: *they* have stolen it from me! Oh! my beloved babes," exclaimed the man, in a voice of rending agony mingled with savage vindictiveness, "the food to which ye are justly entitled, has been snatched away from you by the usurpers and the tyrants who have monopolised all the elegances of life and refuse us even the necessaries! But this shall endure no longer: I will not kiss the hand that strikes me! Forbearance becomes a flagrant cowardice—and I am resolved how to act. Hear me, therefore, my dear wife—thou partner of my woes and sufferings,—hear me also, ye well-beloved children, victims of an accursed condition of society which blesses the few at the expense of the many,—hear me, I say," continued Melmoth, raising his voice until it filled that dismantled garret like the rage of the whirlwind and the fury of the storm,—"hear me while I proclaim a war to the knife against those whom I regard as my enemies—a crusade without quarter against the oppressors of the millions and the usurpers of their rights—a combat to the death against the miscreants who have made God's earth a paradise for themselves and a hell for all the rest!"

"James—my God! he is raving!" cried the wretched Mrs. Melmoth, now falling upon her knees before her husband—an example which was instantaneously followed by the two boys and the young girl; and, sobbing bitterly, they all clung round the half-maddened man, who still remained standing in the midst of that starving, woe-begone, perishing family.

"No, wife—I am *not* raving," he exclaimed, his countenance suddenly softening into an expression of boundless compassion and love, as he bent his looks upon those who thus knelt around him. "But I have awoke from a dream—an idle dream—the dream that what the world calls *honesty* was indeed something to be admired, practised, and persevered in. Oh! it was a grand stroke of policy for the spoliators and plunderers of the millions to invent that word *honesty*—to proclaim it as a cardinal virtue—to invest it with even a halo of divine sanctity—to have it preached from the pulpit, written in the laws, and advocated by the press,—oh! it was a master-piece of ingenuity for ensuring to the few the safe possession and the secure enjoyment of all that they have plundered from the many. But henceforth I discard the doctrine—I scatter to the winds the morality which it inculcates—and I will become what the world denominates a robber and a thief!"

"Oh! no—recall that dreadful menace—recall it, I implore you!" shrieked forth the almost heart-broken wife. "Add not to the misery of our present condition——"

"Father—dear father—do what mother asks you!" exclaimed the children, in united entreaties of anguished fervour. "Pray do not tell us that you will become a robber. It is wicked to be a thief—and you yourself have often told us so, dear father!"

"Yes—but I was a fool—an insensate fool!" cried Melmoth, driven to desperation and pursuing the terrible current of thoughts which had sprung up in his fevered brain and had acquired a complete mastery over his imagination. "Do not fancy, my beloved wife—do not suppose, my dear children—that I will any longer suffer myself to be the victim of those theories which the rich have invented as a protection for their ill-got gains. They have plundered *us*—and yet they dare to maintain that it would be dishonest were we to take back from them the fruit of their own rascality: they have practised a tremendous system of spoliation against ourselves—and yet we are told that it will be wrong to assume the aggressive in return! The word *honesty* constitutes the barrier with which they have surrounded the accumulated produce of their own misdeeds: and the word *dishonesty* is the bugbear with which they seek to frighten away all those who might endeavour to molest them in the enjoyment of their usurped possessions. They have taken away the bread from *me*—from *you*—from all of us;—and I will recover back a portion of what is our due. They have made laws to justify their spoliation and their wrong; and I should be a coward were I not to set those laws at defiance. From this moment, then, do I proclaim war against our oppressors—ravage against the ravagers—invasion against the invaders—desolation against the desolators: yes—by the living God!" thundered Melmoth, now worked up to an appalling state of excitement, and gesticulating ferociously,—"I will plunder the plunderers—I will despoil the spoliators—I will play the brigand against the titled and proudly-born banditti of this realm!"

And exhausted with the violence of tone and gesticulation which had accompanied this dreadful harangue, Melmoth sank upon the empty chest, gasping for breath and every vein in his forehead swollen almost to bursting.

Then piteous and heart-rending indeed was it to behold the anguished wife and weeping children gathering around that man on whose head lay the heavy responsibilities of a husband and a father,—yes, gathering around him with despair depicted upon their wan and emaciated countenances—extending towards him their thin and fleshless hands—and addressing him in prayers of the most passionate entreaty! The woman held up towards him the poor, frail, half-famished babe, as she adjured him to discard the terrible thoughts to which he had

just given such startling and horrifying expression: but the low, weak, feeble cry which the infant's lips sent forth struck upon the father's ears and touched a chord that vibrated with maddening effect to his very heart's core.

"Rise, my dear wife—rise, my beloved children!" he exclaimed, springing from his seat on the chest, and waving his arms over their heads with the mingled wildness and sublimity of a prophet who foretells grand but dreadful things: "you know not what you say when you ask me to become tranquil Are ye not perishing before my eyes?—is not the iron of starvation entering in unto our very souls?—and can I, as a husband and a father, remain quiet and behold unmoved the progress of this work of death? No—no—ten thousand times *no!*" he shouted frantically. "I should be the vilest of cowards were I to see you die thus, without making an effort to save you! To hell with honesty, when wife and children are perishing with want!—to hell with all maudlin morality and sickly sentimentalism, when those whom one loves are going down to the tomb through famine and misery! Look at that innocent babe: in a few hours it will be no more—for your bosom is dry, wife—starvation has withered up your breast! May God's vengeance fall upon me if I endure this spectacle tamely! No—by the eternal justice! ye shall have bread—ye shall eat—ye shall not die of want in the heart of a city teeming with abundance. Again I declare that I should be a pitiful coward — a mean-spirited dog — the veriest poltroon that ever disgraced the noble dignity of Man, were I to let you perish thus without making an effort to save you!"

And, breaking away from his wife and children, the unhappy man — maddened to desperation—sprang to the door. But he had not time to open it ere they arrested his progress — surrounded him again—clung to him—implored him not to leave them—and mingled the most passionate entreaties with the bitterest weeping.

"Hark!" he exclaimed abruptly — waving his hand so imperiously that they fell back as if by a simultaneous impulse—and a dead silence suddenly reigned in the room, broken only by the low plaintive cry of the infant. "One—two—three——"

And he counted on until he had numbered eleven: for the church clock was proclaiming that hour at which the landlady was to be paid or the family was to be thrust forth into the street!

"I will go and speak to Mrs. Thomas," said Melmoth's wife: "I will even fall upon my knees at her feet — I will show her this dying child —— O God! would that we were all dead—or that we had never been born!"

And the wretched woman sank upon the broken chair, her whole frame convulsed with the agonising sobs that tore her bosom.

"Wife, listen to me one moment!" exclaimed Melmoth, in a tone which though soothing and kind towards her, was nevertheless characterised by a firmness that seemed ominous and even terrible after all the previous outpourings of his fevered spirit: "the hour of our doom has struck! It was the knell of fate which rang in our ears. Our only hope is gone—for you see that Miss Foster has not returned. This was what I expected—what I feared! She has fallen into the hands of her enemies: alas! poor girl—she has encountered dishonour in her generous resolve to seek bread for us. Now, my dear wife, I beseech you to tranquillise yourself—for *my* sake—for your children's sake! You perceive that I am calm — very calm——"

"O God! 'tis a calmness which does me more harm to observe than even the excitement which ruled you just now," said the miserable woman, fixing a look full of terror upon the rigid and implacable features of her husband: for his countenance wore the stamp and impress of an iron determination.

"My resolve is taken," he answered, in a cold voice that trembled not: "and no human tongue can dissuade me from adopting it. The war that I have proclaimed against the few who have usurped the rights and self-appropriated the food of the many—that war commences this night! Within an hour the first campaign will have taken place. Ere the clock strikes twelve, I swear to you that I shall return—and then, my beloved wife—*then*, my dearest children, you shall have bread to eat and money to pay the rent! Yes—by the eternal God!" he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of returning excitement,—"ye shall neither starve nor become houseless wanderers so long as the wives and children of the accursed brood of hereditary usurpers revel in luxury and abundance!"

Having thus spoken, James Melmoth tore open the door—rushed from the room—and was already half-way down the stairs before his wife and children could even recover from the consternation into which this sudden movement had plunged them. But, in a few moments, a rending cry proclaimed all the anguish which smote the heart of the wretched woman—and then the grief, the tears, and the sobs of the children burst forth anew.

Mrs. Melmoth hastened down stairs in pursuit of her husband: but at the very instant that she reached the bottom of the lowest flight the front door was banged violently behind him.

"Holy God! he is gone," exclaimed the miserable creature, pressing her babe despairingly to her bosom, as she leant against the wall for support.

"But he says that he shall be back in an hour," observed the vixenish landlady, stepping forward from the farther end of the passage; "and then he has promised to pay me. Howsomever, as I don't mean to sit up on purpose for *that*, it will do the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Heaven have mercy upon me and my innocent children!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a tone of concentrated anguish: and, without making any reply to the landlady, she slowly dragged her failing limbs up the stairs, back to the garret where the other boy was vainly endeavouring to console his little brother and sister.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE YOUNG MAIDEN'S ADVENTURES.

LET us now return to Rose Foster, who, upon sallying forth from the house in which the Melmoths lived, repaired straight to Jermyn Street. The distance between the neighbourhood of Westminster Abbey and the latter place was accomplished in about a quarter of an hour—for the young lady sped rapidly along. It was not however without a feeling of apprehension that she found herself in the

close vicinage of St. James's Square, upon which, be it remembered, a portion of Mrs. Brace's establishment looked, and into which Rose had descended on the night of her escape from the Prince of Wales.

Upon reaching Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street, the trembling girl learnt with a profound satisfaction that Mr. Meagles was at home and also disengaged. But even while she was ascending the stairs to his apartment, a misgiving sprang up in her mind—for she thought that if Melmoth's suspicions, or rather representations concerning him, were indeed accurate to the letter, she was encountering a peril that might prove fatal to her honour and her happiness in this world. She stopped short for a moment—she was even inclined to turn back suddenly and beat a precipitate retreat from the house: but the countenances of Melmoth's famished wife and children presented themselves to her imagination —and she continued her way up the stairs, Mrs. Piggleberry guiding her.

A door was thrown open—and in another moment the young maiden found herself in the presence of Tim Meagles.

Starting from the chair in which he was lounging —tossing into the fire the cigar which he was smoking—and almost upsetting the bottle of claret which he had commenced, Meagles bounded towards her, exclaiming, "Miss Foster! is it indeed you? Thank God that we have met again!"

The pressure which he gave her hand in both his own was as warm and cordial as his words were fervent and welcome; and as he led the maiden to a seat, she felt convinced in her own mind that Meagles must have been calumniated to Melmoth, who had misjudged his character accordingly.

"Sit down, Miss Foster—compose yourself—you are agitated—you are pale—but you have nothing to fear in this house," exclaimed Meagles, giving rapid utterance to these assurances. "I know that you have been persecuted—but I thank God that I see

you safe again—and I implore you to look upon me as a friend."

"Oh! Mr. Meagles," cried the orphan girl, bursting into tears,—"if I had not already considered you in that light, I should not have ventured into your presence now. Pardon this intrusion—forgive this boldness——but——"

She stopped short—a faintness came over her—and, pale though she was at first, yet her countenance now grew so suddenly ashy, that Meagles feared she was about to faint. Pouring out a glass of water, he held it to her lips: she had just strength sufficient to imbibe a few drops—and the cold beverage revived her.

"Will you not lay aside your bonnet, Miss Foster?" said Meagles, throwing into his tone and manner as much respectful attention and delicate courtesy as it was possible to convey or imply by those means. "You are aware that I have no wife, nor sister—nor indeed any female relative to whom I can introduce you: but my landlady will pay you all due regard——"

"Mr. Meagles," interrupted Rose, now thoroughly reassured with respect to his character, and angry with herself that she had ever suspected its integrity,—"I understand and appreciate all the generosity and delicacy of your conduct towards me;—but inasmuch as I come to you as a friend—nay, more—as a sister would fly for succour and advice to a brother—it is unnecessary that there should be any third person present while I converse with you. But you said that you knew I had been persecuted——"

"Alas! poor orphan girl," said Meagles in a tone of deep feeling, while tears started forth from his eyes; "I have indeed heard of the terrible adventure which you experienced a week ago—and I have been making unceasing inquiries concerning you."

"You, Mr. Meagles!" ejaculated Rose, in amazement.

"Yes—certainly," responded Tim, in a tone of unquestionable candour. "From the first moment that I saw you I felt interested in you—as, my God! who would not be, considering the cruel misfortunes which have overtaken you at so early a period of your life? The note which you sent me some weeks ago, gave me pain—because I had hoped and flattered myself that you would condescend to look upon me as a friend. But at the same time I admired your prudence, Miss Foster—and, while I deplored the step which you had taken, inasmuch as it left me ignorant of your place of abode, the good opinion I had already formed of you was enhanced to the highest degree. You now understand, therefore, that I have thought of you often—and very frequently have I wished to know where you were that I might ascertain if you were contented with the new career you had traced out for yourself. Conceive, then, my dismay—my grief—my indignation, when I learnt, a week ago, that you had been made the object of a cruel persecution."

"Ah! Mr. Meagles," exclaimed Rose, the tears chasing each other down her cheeks,—"had I treated you with less reserve—had I consulted you frankly and ingenuously ere I resolved upon any particular proceeding—all that I have endured and encountered would have been avoided. Believing the establishment which I entered to be one of the highest respectability——"

"Oh! what perils have you encountered, Miss Foster!" exclaimed Meagles, abruptly: "for your eyes are doubtless now open to the true character of Mrs. Brace's house——"

"But how did you learn all that has happened to me?" she demanded. "Report says that you are intimate with the Prince of Wales—and it was as an emissary from his Royal Highness to my poor father, that you first became acquainted with *me*. I must conclude, then, that the Prince himself made known to you his unworthy conduct and the manner in which I escaped from him—by adopting a course which makes me shudder even now when I think of it——"

"Heroic girl!" ejaculated Meagles,—"I also have shuddered a thousand times on your account ever since the daring exploit was made known to me. Yes—from the lips of the Prince himself did I hear the tale which excited within me a sentiment of abhorrence towards him equalled only by that of admiration in regard to yourself."

"Was it possible that his Royal Highness knew all along that Camilla Morton was none other than the Rose Foster whom his own wickedness had made an orphan?" inquired the young maiden.

"No—he only ascertained that fact at the last moment—indeed, at the same time that he discovered your flight," answered Meagles. "A letter which you had dropped in the hurry and confusion of that memorable night, and which his Royal Highness picked up, informed him who you were. But think not, Miss Foster, that he was stricken with remorse—or that if he were, the feeling lasted more than a moment. No!" cried Meagles emphatically,—"that man is incapable of sentiments permanently generous or noble; and beware, Miss Foster, how you fall in his way! Let us not, however, dwell upon topics so unpleasant. I was ere now telling you that during the last week I have been making unceasing inquiries concerning you—and this is so true that I have neglected many important matters which demanded my attention. But I knew enough of you to be aware that you are inexperienced and confiding: virtuous and well-intentioned yourself, you are naturally prone to place reliance upon others;—and I trembled, Miss Foster—Oh! I trembled lest you should fall into the snares of the artful, the designing, and the unprincipled."

"Oh! how can I ever sufficiently express my gratitude for all this generous sympathy and friendship on your part?" exclaimed Rose, her voice almost suffocated with sobs. "Alas! alas! I have indeed become the victim of my inexperience—at least so far as my pecuniary affairs are concerned——"

"Tell me all that has occurred to you, Miss Foster," cried Meagles, "since the night on which you escaped from Mrs. Brace's house. I am certain you have endured much—your adventures have been of no ordinary description—for you are pale, care-worn, altered——"

"Heavens! how can it be otherwise?" exclaimed Rose, suddenly becoming painfully excited as the thought of all she had passed through was recalled with terrible vividness to her mind. "Yes—I did indeed trust to people whom I believed honest—and they plundered me—robbed me, Mr. Meagles, of every guinea of that sum which you yourself had invested in my name at the Bank of England. Oh! why did I not come to you? But I sent—or rather some one pretended to call upon you—and I was assured that you had gone to Scotland——"

"Poor girl! you have been terribly deceived indeed," said Meagles. "How cruelly has fortune persecuted you!"

"But I have deserved it all for not having relied on your friendship," exclaimed Rose, with passionate vehemence. "Yes—I have deserved it all—even to the starvation — the famine which I have experienced ——"

"Holy God! is this possible?" ejaculated Meagles, starting from his chair and fixing his eyes on the orphan girl in dismay. "Starvation—famine——No —no—it cannot be! And I have been eating and drinking of the best——Just heavens! starvation—famine!" he repeated, now becoming terribly excited in his turn. "Alas! alas! those pale cheeks—that altered mien——Oh! Miss Foster—Miss Foster—how is it possible that you could have endured all this without deigning to recollect that I was your friend? But, my God! while I am thus giving way to my feelings, you are suffering with hunger——"

And he sprang towards the bell to summon his valet to spread food upon the table. But Rose, divining his intention, caught hold of his arm, exclaiming, "I require nothing now—my heart is too full—and moreover, I have left kind and generous friends perishing with want——"

"Command me in every way, Miss Foster!" interrupted Meagles. "Tell me how I can serve yon or those in whom you are interested. Thank God! my purse is well filled at this moment—and if it were not, I would sell everything to obtain the means of fulfilling your wishes."

"Generous friend! how deep is the debt of gratitude which I owe you!" exclaimed Rose, the tears again streaming down her cheeks. "But grant me your patience a few minutes—and I will tell you all that has occurred to me since the night on which I escaped from the dwelling of Mrs. Brace."

Meagles reseated himself—and Rose proceeded to recount the various adventures with which the reader is already acquainted,—how she fell in with a man and woman who demonstrated the utmost sympathy towards her—how they plundered her of all she possessed in the world—how she experienced a real compassion and kindness at the hands of the Melmoths—and how she had just left that family not only perishing through destitution, but likewise menaced with ejection from the miserable garret that constituted their home.

"Where do these good people live?" inquired Meagles, again springing from his seat: "I will lose not a moment in repairing to their aid."

Miss Foster mentioned the address—and Meagles put on his hat.

"But I will go with you," she said: "indeed I am glad to avail myself of your escort, at this late hour, to the place which is likewise my home now," she added, with a mournful tremulousness of the voice—for the recent incidents of her life were constantly reminding her of the happy days when she dwelt beneath the same roof with those fond parents who were now no more.

"Miss Foster," said Meagles, "if you wish to return to the lodging which, from all the circumstances you have just revealed to me, I must presume to be a very humble one, I shall conduct you thither as a matter of course. But if you will place yourself in the care of my landlady until to-morrow, when we shall be enabled to consult together upon future arrangements for your welfare and happiness——"

"Mr. Meagles," interrupted Rose, "I have witnessed and shared the misery of the poor family to whom I owe so many obligations—and, as your generosity is about to prove the means of their salvation, I could wish to behold and join in the happiness that you are this night destined to raise up in their abode. Permit me, then, to accompany you," she added in a tone of earnest entreaty: "and to-morrow I shall venture to intrude myself upon your presence again—for, alas! the poor orphan, Mr. Meagles, has no other friend on earth save you!"

"And the sincerity of my friendship, Miss Foster, shall be proved by the alacrity and cheerfulness with which I am prepared to fulfil all your wishes. Come, then—and we will hasten together to the abode of these worthy but unhappy people whose hearts were not hardened by poverty nor rendered selfish by misery against the sufferings of a fellow-creature."

Rose darted a look of fervent gratitude upon Meagles, whose honourable intentions with regard to herself now seemed beyond all question; and they sallied forth together, just as the bells of St. James's church were chiming a quarter past eleven.

CHAPTER XCIX.

STARTLING INCIDENTS.

ALTHOUGH she had fasted for so many long hours, yet Rose Foster felt not hungry now. Hope had risen up in her bosom,—that hope which was meat and drink to her physical being, and animation and excitement to her spirits. Meagles was proving himself a friend—and they were on their way together to carry succour and solace to the starving family of the working man who was able and willing to work, but could obtain no work to do!

A quarter past eleven!—the hour had gone by at which the rent was to be paid—but by half-past eleven they could reach the Melmoths' lodging in Westminster, and doubtless it would not be too late.

These thoughts swept rapidly through the brain of the young maiden, as, leaning upon the arm of Tim Meagles, she hurried along Jermyn Street; and as it was shorter to cross St. James's Square than to go round by Lower Regent Street, she gently drew him in that direction—for the fear of reviving unpleasant reminiscences in her mind was prompting him to take the more circuitous route. But with Meagles as a protector, she dreaded nothing: moreover, her spirits were too elate with enthusiastic hope to allow room for any misgivings or apprehensions.

Firmly and lightly, therefore, tripped the feet of the pale but lovely girl on the pavement of that aristocratic Square; and the moon, breaking from behind a cloud, brought into relief the fronts of the houses on the southern side and showed her the very window whence she had achieved her perilous descent a week back.

The night was cold and partially tempestuous: and scarcely had the silver planet peeped forth from the dark curtains above, when it was obscured again by the dense and ominous masses of clouds —like a beauty coquetting from behind a black veil. Thus, having allowed Rose Foster a transient glimpse of the casement from which her flight had been accomplished, the fickle Goddess of Night

disappeared suddenly—and it seemed as if some giant hand had piled the dark storm-clouds all in a moment before her alabaster throne.

The obscurity in St. James's Square was now relieved only by the feeble glimmering of the oil-lamps stationed at wide intervals along the pavement skirting the houses: but the walk bordering the iron railings of the enclosure was involved in a far deeper darkness. The evergreens within the iron fence, a portion of which their branches overhung, formed a black shade in one particular spot; and it was while Meagles and Rose Foster were passing through this gloom, in order to make as short a cut as possible across the Square, that a man suddenly sprang upon them as it were from out of the darkness.

So abrupt and violent was this attack that Meagles, against whom the ruffian had directed his assault, was levelled with the ground, where he lay either dead or senseless; and Rose, losing all her presence of mind in an instant, darted away screaming for help and raising the cry of "Murder."

The man lost not a moment in profiting by the deed which he had committed. Rifling the pockets of Meagles, he possessed himself of that individual's purse and watch, which he hastily secured about his own person: but before he turned to fly—and although the rending screams of Rose were echoing thrillingly through the Square—he bent for a few instants over the form of Meagles to ascertain whether life had departed. At that moment the moon shone forth again, and its beams falling upon the countenance of Meagles revealed its lineaments to the robber, so that, although he knew not who his victim was, yet he saw enough of his features to have them immediately impressed upon his memory. At the same time he thrust his hand into the breast of the unconscious man and felt that his heart was beating, though with feeble pulsations: then, giving vent to the ejaculation of "Thank God! I am not a murderer *yet*," he darted precipitately away from the scene of his crime.

Meanwhile Rose Foster had fled madly and frantically, without heeding the direction which she was taking—piercing screams still proclaiming her terror; when, all on a sudden, she came in violent contact with a lady who, attended by a tall livery-servant, had stopped short in alarm at the rending voice of female anguish which thus broke frightfully upon the stillness of the place and hour.

"Good heavens! what ails her?" exclaimed the lady, as Rose, utterly exhausted, sank fainting into her arms.

At that moment the moon revealed to her eyes the countenance—the well-known countenance—of Rose Foster; and an ejaculation of mingled joy and surprise followed that of alarm which had already burst from her lips. A word summoned the domestic to her side: and the powerful liveried lacquey, raising the insensible girl in his arms, bore her hastily along to a house close by.

A few minutes afterwards Rose began slowly to awake to consciousness; and her eyes, as they opened heavily, encountered the light of candles. Casting a gaze around, she perceived that she was lying upon the bed in a well-furnished chamber, the appearance of which instantaneously struck her as being not altogether unfamiliar. Pressing her hand to her brow in order to steady her thoughts, she speedily recollected the incidents of the night; and, startled by the remembrance that the last event had occurred in St. James's Square, she flung a wild and shuddering look around. A terrible suspicion had suddenly sprung up in her mind; and it was now confirmed most fatally:—for the chamber was indeed well known to the unhappy girl—and the never-to-be-forgotten countenance of Mrs. Brace was bending over her!

A moan of ineffable anguish burst from the laden bosom of the persecuted orphan—and her senses once more abandoned her.

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In the meantime Meagles had recovered from the stunning effect of the violent blow which the robber had dealt him; and, rising from the ground, he leant against the iron railings while he recalled to mind everything that had happened. Memory performed her part actively; and he found that Rose had disappeared—that he himself had been robbed of his purse and watch—and that his hat had alone saved his skull from being fractured by the desperate assault which had been made upon him with a bludgeon or some similarly heavy weapon, the effects of which were still experienced most painfully.

But what had become of Rose? *This* was his principal consideration; and, caring comparatively nothing for the loss of his purse and watch and the contusion which he had received, he looked anxiously all around in search of the young orphan maiden. Vainly did he thus plunge his eyes into the obscurity of the night: her form met not his view. In a hurried manner he made the circuit of the Square: still she appeared not. What could have become of her? Perhaps she had returned to his lodgings to procure assistance. Thither he repaired: but Mrs. Piggleberry assured him that the young lady had not come back. Suddenly it struck him that she might have fled to her own humble abode; and as she had mentioned to him the address of the house where herself and the Melmoths lodged, he decided upon hastening thither without delay.

Towards Westminster Abbey did Tim Meagles accordingly proceed. Although he could not possibly account for Rose Foster's disappearance, and although he felt confident that she had not been murdered nor ill-treated by the same ruffian who had plundered him, it nevertheless did not strike him for an instant that she could have fallen once more into the hands of Mrs. Brace. Hoping, therefore, to find her at the house in which the Melmoths resided, he hastened thither with all speed: but even when he had plunged into the maze of pestilential streets where crime and poverty herded together almost beneath the very shade of the sacred Abbey's towers, he experienced some degree of trouble in finding the dwelling which he sought.

But at last he succeeded; and ere he knocked at the door, he looked up at the house. Every window was dark save one on the uppermost storey; and thence a few feeble rays came forth—poverty's unmistakable rushlight glimmering!

Without farther hesitation, Meagles knocked—not in a commanding manner—but quietly: for he was afraid of compromising the reputation of the young lady by announcing his visit at that late hour in a way calculated to attract attention on the part of the inmates of the dwelling or of the neighbours.

Several minutes elapsed—and he knocked again.

At the expiration of a considerable interval, the door was opened—and, by the dim and uncertain light of the moon, Meagles beheld the wasted and emaciated countenance of a lad of about thirteen.

"Does a working man of the name of Melmoth reside here?" asked Meagles: and, without waiting for the response, he added, "Because I am come to relieve him."

"Yes, sir—he does—he is my father," said the lad.

"And Miss Foster——"

"Also lives in this house, sir. But——"

"She is not at home, then?" exclaimed Meagles, his heart sinking within him as that monosyllabic antithesis to hope fell upon his ears.

"No, sir," replied young Melmoth. "She went out at about half-past nine o'clock—and we've been very anxious concerning her ever since. We're afraid she has fallen into some trouble—because she went to see a gentleman who father says is connected with the Prince of Wales."

"That is Mr. Meagles—eh?" observed Tim.

"Yes, sir—the same," was the answer.

"Well—show me up stairs, my boy," said Meagles, after a few moments' reflection: "I should like to say a word or two to your father. I suppose he is at home?"

"He has been in about ten minutes, sir," replied the youth.

Meagles entered the house, closing the door behind him. The lad led the way up stairs—and Meagles followed in the total darkness which prevailed. At length, on reaching the top storey, the boy threw open a door—and the visitor entered the garret, where the Melmoth family were grouped round the chest on which there were loaves of bread, cold meat, and cheese.

But the instant that Melmoth caught sight of the countenance of Meagles, horror and dismay spread over his own features—and, dropping the food which he was in the act of conveying to his mouth, he staggered back against the wall. At the same moment something dropped from about his person; and the object fell upon the floor with a metallic sound accompanied by the smashing of glass.

"Great heavens! what do I behold?" ejaculated Meagles, springing forward and picking up the object alluded to. "My watch!"—and he held it up by the chain, with amazement and indignation depicted upon his countenance.

A scream burst from the lips of Mrs. Melmoth, as this incident carried to her soul, with the vividness of lightning, the conviction that her husband's temporary absence that night had been marked by a deed stamping him as a criminal!

The elder boy likewise comprehended the meaning of this scene respecting the watch—and his grief burst forth in piteous lamentations: while the other children, alarmed at what they could not however understand, flew to their mother with cries of terror and anguish.

For she had fallen upon her knees—clasping her poor babe to her bosom;—and her eyes wandered wildly from the countenance of her husband to that of Meagles.

And Melmoth himself?—how did he feel? how did he look?

Guilt was written upon every feature of his face and stamped upon every lineament!—guilt was expressed in his quailing attitude—his trembling form!—the whole being of the wretched man was guilt personified!

He had not the hardihood to repeat the account that he had given his wife of the way in which he had obtained the means to purchase the food he had brought home with him and to pay the arrears of rent;—he was not so proficient in turpitude as to be enabled to renew and persist in the tale which he had forged to lull asleep the appalling suspicions that had naturally sprung up in the woman's mind, in the first instance, when she saw her husband return with provisions and money. No—he could not put a bold front upon matters now! The watch, which he had concealed about his person, became the damning evidence against him: and, suddenly rendered a coward by the discovery of his enormity, the unhappy Melmoth stood in the presence of Meagles like a prisoner awaiting his doom from the lips of a judge!

We have already stated that the first sentiment which seized upon Meagles was one of mingled amazement and indignation: but, as the scream of the wife and the cries of the children smote his ear, his heart relented—and he instantly comprehended the entire truth!

"My good woman," he hastened to exclaim, as he turned towards the poor emaciated mother who had fallen upon her knees in indescribable anguish,—"fear nothing—I will not harm your husband—I pardon him!"

"God bless you—God bless you, kind gentleman!" murmured the woman, in a tone of such grateful fervour—such plaintive earnestness, that Meagles felt he never could have forgiven himself if he had promptly taken that harsh step which so many in his situation would have adopted. "May God Almighty bless you, sir!" she repeated, her voice gathering more energy from the enthusiasm of her manner. "Children, down upon your knees—and thank this good gentleman for sparing your father—for saving *you* also from a disgrace which heaven grant that you do not understand."

And the children knelt around Meagles—and Melmoth himself burst into a perfect agony of weeping.

Solemnly and sublimely interesting was this scene: for there was the scapegrace adventurer receiving the homage due to the good deed which he had done towards the poor working man whom the bitterness of penury had driven to crime!

"Now let us know each other better, my worthy friend," said Meagles, hastening to raise the woman and her children: then, taking Melmoth's hand, he observed, "I can understand the whole truth of the incidents of this night as plainly as if I had just read them in a book. You need not utter a word of explanation. This room tells *your* tale with a too terrible fidelity," he added, glancing hastily around upon the naked walls: "and if any chapter were deficient in the narrative of woe and suffering, it may be found in the emaciated features of your wife and children. Not for worlds, therefore, would I injure you! I cannot even blame you. By heaven! I would do the same sooner than see those whom I love perishing by inches! And now let me tell you that the gold which you have about you, was actually intended to relieve you."

"Is this possible?" exclaimed Melmoth, sobbing like a child.

"It is true I can assure you," was the response: "and my name is Meagles."

"Oh! what strange incidents have occurred this night!" ejaculated the working man. "But Miss Foster——Ah! something strikes me——My God! —a lady was with you in the Square—and she fled precipitately—rending the air with her screams——"

"Descend not into explanations which may become *too* intelligible," said Meagles, glancing significantly towards the children. "But tell me—do you think that Miss Foster recognised you——"

"No—I am certain she did not," answered Melmoth. "God forbid!" he cried in a tone of almost wild excitement: "I am already sufficiently humbled and miserable enough, without having that crushing idea to overwhelm me altogether. But is it possible, sir, that anything can have happened to that excellent young lady?"

"I am seriously—very seriously alarmed on her account," said Meagles. "When I came back to consciousness, she was gone. I searched for her in the Square—but vainly. What *can* have become of the poor orphan whom misfortunes appear to pursue and persecute with unremitting rancour?"

"Let us go forth and search for her, sir," exclaimed Melmoth.

"It is useless," observed Meagles. "Where can we search? Let us rather hope that some kind persons have given her an asylum for the night, and that to-morrow morning we shall receive gladdening intelligence respecting her."

"God send that such may prove the case!" cried Melmoth.

"I shall now leave you," said Meagles: "but I shall not lose sight of you. As to what has occurred —think no more of it! Poverty engenders much which deserves pity rather than blame; and the good reputation of years must not be considered ruined by the madness of a moment. Farewell for the present —and may better days await you. You will soon see me again."

And, without waiting for a renewed outpouring of the fervent thanks of the Melmoth family, Meagles hastened away. The eldest lad followed him down to the door—and ere Tim could succeed in quitting the house, that grateful boy had seized his hand, pressed it to his lips, and covered it with his tears.

CHAPTER C.

STAMFORD MANOR.

THE incidents of our tale follow each other in rapid succession; and the stage of our drama is crowded with characters and busy with action. But busier still, if possible, is it shortly destined to become; and of a deeper and more exciting interest are the events which yet remain to be told.

All that is most horrible in respect to crime—most pathetic and touching in the sphere of love —most terrible with regard to the oppression sustained by the poor at the hands of the rich—and most startling or rivetting, enthralling or attractive, in reference to variety of incident,—all these features have yet more fully to develop themselves in the progress of our narrative.

To scenes more strange than any yet depicted, will the reader have to be introduced: through the maze of adventures still more mysterious and exciting than those already recorded, will he have to accompany us.

As the subject grows upon us, our energies appear to take the colossal proportions adequate to the task of elaborating it: our imagination expands commensurately with the labour which it has to perform.

To accumulate incident upon incident with a rapidity which flags not, may appear to many the Titanian toil of heaping Ossa upon Pelion—mount upon mountain:—but to us it is a task fraught with its own exciting pleasure.

And so will it seem to us until the end!

We must now request our readers to accompany us to Stamford Manor, which, as stated in the first chapter of this history, was situated at a distance of about three miles from Aylesbury.

It was a handsome building—of imposing appearance externally, and splendidly fitted up within; and the fire which had occurred simultaneously with the appalling tragedy wherein Lady Stamford played the terrible part of the guilty heroine, had not achieved any considerable amount of damage.

On the same night when the incidents just related took place, and at about nine o'clock, a post-chaise drove up to the door of Stamford Manor; and Mr. Page, leaping forth, assisted his wife to descend.

Having dismissed the vehicle, which was hired at Aylesbury, the worthy couple entered the hall; and Mr. Page, addressing the old woman who had admitted them into the mansion, said, "You, I presume, are the person left in charge of the premises?"

"Yes, sir—my name is Bryan," was the answer, accompanied by a low curtsey. "I dessay Sir Richard told you to inquire for Mrs. Bryan, didn't he? Leastways, I should think it most likely that he did——"

"My good woman," interrupted Mr. Page,—"I can perceive at once that you are disposed to be garrulous—and there's nothing I like less than garrulity. Your master has written to you, stating that a gentleman and lady would call here this evening—eh?"

And as Mr. Page gave utterance to the word "lady," he glanced complaisantly towards Julia who was decked out in all the flaunting colours which the worst possible taste could have managed to accumulate.

"Yes, sir," answered Mrs. Bryan: "Sir Richard honoured me with a letter—leastways with a note —which the postman brought over this morning from Aylesbury: or I should say the post-boy, by rights—for he's a mere lad of some sixteen, or so——"

"Never mind how old he is, Mrs. Bryan," exclaimed Mr. Page. "He brought you the letter safe —and that's all we have to care about. But this letter duly informed you that a certain Mr. Page and his lady would probably call here in the evening —is it not so?"

"Yes, sir—and that you would pass the night here," returned the woman; "and I was to mind and make you as comfortable as possible. So I've got you a nice roast fowl for your supper—and put clean sheets on the best bed——"

"Well and good," said the ex-commercial traveller. "I perceive that it becomes altogether unnecessary to inform you that *I* am Mr. Page," he continued pompously,—"and that *this* lady is *my*

lady—or, in vulgar terms, my wife. How long will supper be before it's ready?"

"Half-an-hour, sir," was the answer: "leastways, three quarters at the outside—'cause there's a bit of ham a-biling to eat with the fowl."

"Well, then," said Mr. Page, in a musing tone as he turned towards his wife, who had been admiring the statues and vases in the marble hall while the preceding colloquy took place between her husband and the ancient domestic: "I think we may as well commence our work this evening. At all events, I should like to sort and seal up the papers to-night."

"What's to prevent us?" demanded Julia. "You have heard that there's three quarters of an hour till supper-time—and we may do a great deal in that interval. For mind you, I don't mean to sleep in this house to-morrow night. It's enough, in all conscience, to sleep here one night—with the reputation that the place has got."

"Oh! that's all nonsense, Julia!" exclaimed Mr. Page. "I only wish Sir Richard would make you and me a present of the Manor on condition that we must live in it nine months out of every year: I don't think we should forfeit possession, let it be ever so desperately haunted."

"Haunted indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Bryan, catching at the word as a new pivot whereon her garrulity had an opportunity of turning. "There's no doubt about its being haunted. Why—after the terrible business took place, and her ladyship died, the servants left one after another, 'cause it was soon knowed that the sperret of her ladyship walked——"

"Trash!—nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Page. "An enlightened man—gentleman, I mean—like me, scorns such silly notions. But how happens it that if her ladyship *walks*, as you call it,—how happens it, I should like to know, that you have courage enough to live all alone in the house?"

"Not exactly all alone, sir," replied Mrs. Bryan: "'cause my husband's with me—and he takes care of the grounds. But if we wasn't poor people and glad to earn an honest penny any-how, I'm sure we shouldn't have undertook the charge of the Manor when the regular servants—housekeeper, gardener, footmen, cook, maids, and all—deserted it in the fashion they did. Leastways——"

"Pray cease to inflict your '*leastways*' upon us, my good woman," said the pragmatical Mr. Page; "and tell us honestly and truly whether *you* ever saw the ghost of her ladyship?"

"I can't say that I ever seed anything, sir," answered Mrs. Bryan: "but I've heerd a many strange noises which has quite freezed the blood in my veins and made my 'air stand up——"

"Why, you arrant old humbug," ejaculated Mr. Page; "you wear a wig! How can you look me in the face, and talk about your hair standing on end? I suppose you will be telling us next that your teeth chattered?" he added, the point of his remark existing in the fact that the ancient dame had no teeth at all.

"Well, sir—I didn't mean no offence," she said, with a good humour that was imperturbable. "When I spoke of my 'air standing on end, it was what I've heerd called a figger of speech—or something of that kind. But raly and truly, me and my husband have heerd strange noises at times;—and if it wasn't an object to us to live rent-free, have the use of the wegitables, and ten shillings a-week into the bargain—with the chance of being retained in the service of them as becomes the owners of the estate after the sale,—if it wasn't for all this, I was saying, we shouldn't remain here no longer—or yet have stayed so long."

"Then you know that the Manor and the park are to be sold by private contract—eh?" said Page.

"To be sure, sir. A many gentlemen and ladies has been to look at it. They tell us that the sale's to take place next week," said Mrs. Bryan. "I don't know how true the report may be——"

"It is quite true," observed Mr. Page. "Sir Richard Stamford feels that he can never live here again after all that has occurred—and he wants to dispose of the place as soon as possible. Next week, as you have been informed, the sale will most probably be accomplished. I and my lady are intimate friends of Sir Richard's—indeed, I may say we are bosom friends," continued the ex-traveller pompously: "and he has testified his regard for us by honouring us with his confidence on the present occasion. For I suppose you are aware of our purpose in visiting the Manor, my good woman?"

"Sir Richard tells my husband and me in his letter that you're going to take away all the papers and wallyables——"

"Say *valuables*, if you please," interrupted Mr. Page: "it is more classical."

"Well—how much longer is this nonsense going to continue?" asked Julia. "If you mean to look over the papers this evening, we had better begin at once."

"True, my dear spouse," observed Mr. Page. "Now, my good woman, have the kindness to conduct us to the study or library, as the case may be—and if you get supper ready in about three quarters of an hour, it will be time enough. We will attend to business first, and enjoy ourselves afterwards."

Mrs. Bryan lighted a parlour-lamp by means of the candle which she carried in her hand; and she then led the way to the library. Placing the lamp on a handsome desk which stood in the room, she would have renewed the conversation with all the pertinacity of her garrulous temperament, had not Julia unceremoniously bade her retire—an order which she obeyed with perfect good humour and a low curtsey.

Mr. Page deposited his hat and cloak on a chair, while Julia likewise laid aside her bonnet and mantle; and, having taken a rapid survey of the apartment and its numerous shelves filled with elegantly bound books, they proceeded to inspect the contents of the desk, the keys of which the ex-traveller had in his possession.

"You remember," said Mrs. Page, "that all the correspondence which ever passed between Sir Richard and the bankers is to be preserved."

"I have forgotten none of the instructions which the baronet gave us, my dear," returned Page. "You are quite right—the letters you mention are to be preserved, in case they should be wanted for the winding up of the affairs of the bank. Well, it's a lucky thing for Sir Richard that he will have saved from the wreck of his property so much more than he at first anticipated. It made me quite happy to see him in such good spirits yesterday at Windsor. But what is that bundle of papers you have just taken out of the little drawer there?" demanded Mr. Page of his wife.

"'*Correspondence with my Eleanor*,'" answered Julia, reading the endorsement.

"That is to be burnt—the whole of it," exclaimed Page. "Untie the bundle and scatter the letters in the grate: they will take the flames more easily in that fashion. And here is another bundle destined to share the same fate: it is endorsed '*Miscellaneous*.' By the bye, wasn't it a strange thing that Sir Richard was walking with the Princess Amelia in Windsor Park yesterday? She is really a sweet pretty young lady. There is something quite royal about her—and even before that park-keeper whom we questioned told us who she was, I had an instinctive presentiment that she was of high birth."

"Of high nonsense!" exclaimed Julia, who was busily engaged in burning the condemned correspondence. "How can one woman be so different from another as all that?"

"I didn't mean to pay you any ill compliment, Julia my love," returned Mr. Page: "no odious comparisons, you know—for you're a very pretty and genteel young woman—lady I meant to say—and ought to be a princess. But I was observing that Sir Richard was walking with the Princess in the park, when we went in search of him——"

"And he did not appear over well pleased that we accosted him while he was with her Royal Highness," interrupted Mrs. Page, returning to the table on which her husband was scattering and sorting the correspondence. "Now—which heap is to be burnt—and which preserved?"

"Take these and throw them into the grate," replied the ex-traveller. "The greater portion is to be destroyed, I see. Strange that Sir Richard Stamford himself should have such an unconquerable aversion to visit the Manor!"

"Not strange at all," observed Julia,—"seeing that his wife killed herself within its walls—and that such a mass of misfortunes all fell upon the poor dear gentleman's head at the same moment. It would be far more strange if he thought of ever living here again. But I have cleared away the heap that you put aside to be burnt. Are there no more papers for the flames?"

"Patience, my dear—patience," said the ex-traveller. "I am not quite sure whether we have thoroughly examined this desk. It is an old fashioned piece of furniture—and there may be secret drawers, or what not."

"If there were, Sir Richard Stamford would have told you so," observed Julia. "But as he said nothing at all of the kind, you may be sure that there are 'none. Now, do make haste and leave off fiddling about with those little drawers. What is the use of pulling them all out in that manner?" she demanded impatiently.

"Because, my dear, I suspect that there *is* a secret recess in this piece of furniture," answered Page, in a mysterious tone. "Sir Richard Stamford may not know anything about it: but *I* am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man, my love—and the more I examine the arrangements of this desk, the more I am convinced that there is some curious contrivance about it. Look at the places into which these drawers fit: they don't go close up to the board at the back. That's quite clear! But here is a sort of false back——Hey-dey!" he suddenly exclaimed; and at the same moment that the ejaculation burst from his lips, the sharp, abrupt, clicking sound of a spring giving way startled his wife.

"What is it?" she demanded, hurrying close up to the desk.

"Just what I expected—and no more than I thought," responded Page, joyously. "A secret recess, my love!—a private compartment, my dear! Look—the false back to the desk has started out of its setting! Who was right in his suspicions—eh?"

And the ex-traveller chuckled with glee.

"Come—let us examine it," said Mrs. Page, thrusting her hand into the recess: but she instantly drew it out again all covered over with the dust that had accumulated therein.

"By Jove! the secret compartment must have remained unused for a length of time!" exclaimed the ex-traveller. "Depend upon it, we are in luck's way! Our vocation seems to be the discovery of important documents regarding other people's business."

Thus speaking, Mr. Page tucked up his coat-sleeve and laced wristband, and thrust his hand into the recess.

"Papers, by jingo!" he exclaimed, drawing forth a bundle of letters much soiled by dust, and tied round with a faded riband. "But let us see whether there is any endorsement."

And having wiped off the dust, he approached the bundle to the lamp in such a manner that the light streamed full upon it. His wife looked over his shoulder; and their countenances expanded with joy at the same moment, as their eyes decyphered the following lines written at the back of the letter which was uppermost in the packet:—

Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford: together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments. In the Years 1757—1758.

"That must be the former Lady Stamford—the wife of Sir William!" exclaimed Page. "Depend upon it, Julia my dear, these documents contain startling intelligence of some kind or other. Perhaps respecting the birth——"

At this moment the door of the library was opened and a man with his hat on and enveloped in a cloak, appeared upon the threshold.

Mr. Page and his wife turned their eyes upon him at the same instant: and simultaneously also did ejaculations of terror burst from their lips—while their features became convulsed with horror,—and the packet of papers fell from the hand of the ex-traveller.

For the countenance which thus met their startled, shuddering view and sent the blood with the chill of ice to their hearts, was that of Ramsey who had been hung at the debtors' door of Newgate!

Could they be mistaken? No: another look convinced them that those indeed were the features so indelibly impressed upon their memories; and, with yet louder and wilder cries, they precipitated themselves from the room by a second door opening at the farther extremity.

Away they sped in total darkness along a passage: crash they came against a door, which the violence of the concussion forced open—a light streamed upon their eyes—a shriek saluted their ears—and from their own tongues thrilled the awful alarm of "A ghost! a ghost!"

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[THE DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE.]

CHAPTER CI.

ARRIVALS AT THE MANOR.

The fact was that the room into which Mr. and Mrs. Page thus suddenly burst, was the one occupied by Mrs. Bryan and her husband, and where this worthy couple were at the moment partaking of a salubrious and frugal supper of bread and cheese, onions, and home-brewed ale. The shriek emanated from Mrs. Bryan, who was terribly startled at the violent and unceremonious manner in which the door was thrown open; and Mr. and Mrs. Page explained the cause of their own alarm by giving vent to the ejaculation of "A ghost! a ghost!"

Mr. Bryan, the gardener, who was an old man with a face as red and shrivelled as a wind-fall pippin, bounded from his seat — caught up the poker—and threw a fierce look around, as much as to imply that the ghost had better mind what it was about. His wife set up a piteous moaning, interspersed with such expressions as "Dearey me! dearey me!" and "Lauk-a-day! what will become of us?"—while Mrs. Page sank exhausted upon a chair—and her husband cast a rapid and frightened look behind, to ascertain whether any hideous spectre was in pursuit of them.

But observing nothing, Mr. Page became a trifle more courageous; and, mustering up valour enough to shut the door, he said to the gardener, "Put down the poker, my good man: the spirit has not followed us—and even if he had, it would be of no use to take up the fire-irons against him."

Mr. Bryan accordingly replaced the poker on the hearth, and resumed his seat,—saying, "What was it you thought you saw, sir?"

"Thought!" ejaculated Page, completely bewildered: "by heaven! there was no thinking in the matter! I am not inclined to superstition—I

never believed in ghosts till now—but this adventure has altogether staggered me."

And the ex-traveller began to pace the room in an agitated manner.

"What was it you saw, ma'am?" inquired the gardener, now appealing to Mrs. Page for an explanation.

"Oh! don't talk to me about it," exclaimed Julia, trembling violently from head to foot: "it makes me shudder merely to think of it."

"Dearey me! dearey me!" moaned Mrs. Bryan, rocking herself to and fro upon her seat: "what can it all mean? Leastways, what is it all about? If it was only a chimbley falling, we should have heerd it—or a cat breaking a winder ——"

"No—it could not have been imagination!" cried Page, stopping suddenly short alike in his agitated walk and his bewildered reflections. "But let us put the matter to the test. Julia, my dear, what was it you thought you saw?"

"Ramsey, who was hanged," replied the young woman, casting around looks of unspeakable terror.

"Exactly what I fancied!" exclaimed the ex-traveller, feeling that his flesh was creeping upon his bones and his blood running chill in his veins.

"Dearey me! dearey me!" moaned Mrs. Bryan more piteously than ever.

"The ghost of Ramsey as was hanged!" murmured the old gardener, with a visible shudder.

"It was indeed!" said Page, in a musing tone: "and yet this is almost incredible. I am not superstitious, as I just now observed: but what can I think? Either that the fellow has come to life again—or that his spirit haunts the place which is so closely connected with his crimes."

And again did Mr. Page walk to and fro with nervous agitation visible in his manner and depicted upon his countenance.

"You didn't bring the papers away with you?" said Julia. "*Those* papers—you know which I mean," she added significantly.

"No—I dropped them in the confusion of the moment," answered Page. "But they are worth looking after—and, by Jove! I'll venture back into the library, ghost or no ghost! Will anybody come with me?"

"Dearey me, not I!" ejaculated Mrs. Bryan: and looking towards her husband, she said, "Can't you go with the gen'leman instead of sitting there like an old fool?"

"Yes—come with me," said Page: then, tossing down a guinea upon the table, he observed. "There! —will *that* inspire you with courage, my good fellow?"

The gardener picked up the money—put it into his waistcoat pocket—and, rising slowly from his seat, intimated his readiness to follow the ex-traveller to the library.

Mrs. Page sate fast in her chair; and her husband did not think it worth while to solicit her company: but taking a candle from the table, he led the way along the passage, old Bryan keeping close to his heels.

On reaching the door whence he and his wife had so precipitately escaped from the library, Mr. Page perceived that it was wide open just as it had been left; and, summoning all his courage to his aid, he advanced to the threshold. The hurried and indeed fearful glance which he threw into the apartment, showed him in a moment that no one was there: and, considerably relieved, he entered with a comparatively firm step, the old gardener still following and gathering confidence from the fact that nothing terrible was to be seen.

Advancing towards the desk, Mr. Page looked anxiously about for the papers which he had discovered in the secret recess, and which contained the "correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford:" but the packet was nowhere to be found. Vainly did he search amongst the documents scattered about—vainly did he go upon all fours and examine underneath the furniture: that particular collection of letters had disappeared!

"Well, this *is* most extraordinary!" muttered the bewildered Page to himself: "I am not so foolish as to imagine that a ghost would walk off with a parcel of papers! No—no—it was not a spirit—it was a living man—but whether Ramsey himself, resuscitated by some wondrous and unaccountable means, or a person as like him as two peas, it is impossible to determine. Perdition seize it!—the papers which would have perhaps made my fortune, have been snatched from my grasp!"

But scarcely had the ex-traveller reached this point in his musings, when he was suddenly interrupted by a loud knocking and ringing at the front door of the mansion.

"Who can that be?" exclaimed the old gardener. "Sir Richard perhaps——"

"No such thing!" cried Page. "The baronet is at Windsor, and will never set foot in this house again, I am very certain, after all that has happened. But come along—I will go with you to see who it is: for remember," he added with pompous self-sufficiency, "*I* represent Sir Richard Stamford during my brief sojourn beneath this roof."

"Just as you like, sir," returned Bryan, who had no ambition to dispute the honour with the important, conceited, and bustling Mr. Page.

They accordingly hurried to the front door; and the moment it was opened, a lady and gentleman entered the hall without any ceremony. Mr. Page's eyes first sought the countenance of the former—for he was a great admirer of the fair sex; and the dazzling beauty which met his view completely rivetted his gaze for several moments. But on turning his looks upon the features of the gentleman to whose arm she clung, an ejaculation of mingled surprise and confusion burst from the lips of the ex-bagman: for he instantaneously recognised the Prince of Wales!

Meantime the gardener, fancying that he beheld his master Sir Richard Stamford, was making sundry awkward bows and pulling his forelock in token of respect: while the Prince himself, taking no notice whatsoever of the old man, kept his eyes fixed on Mr. Page, racking his memory to discover who he was. For the ex-traveller's features were quite familiar to his Royal Highness, who could not however for the life of him recollect at the moment where he had seen that thin, sallow, angular face before.

It was quite clear, however, to the Prince that he was recognised by this individual: and, not relishing the manner in which he was now being stared at, he said somewhat sharply, "What is your name, sir?—who are you?"

"My name is Page, at your Royal Highness's ser-

vice," was the response: "and if your Royal Highness will remember a certain night at the George and Blue Boar——"

"Ah! by heaven! I recollect," cried the Prince, his face suddenly flushing with indignation: "you are the insolent scoundrel who dared to address me in a most familiar and presumptuous manner, and to follow me with a pertinacity as unaccountable as it was rude. What did you mean by it, sirrah?—and who are you?"

"I humbly beseech the pardon of your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page, bowing and scraping with the utmost deference: "but the little affair referred to, is easily explained. The truth is that at the time when the incident took place, a reward was offered for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford—and the extraordinary likeness which your Royal Highness bears to the baronet led me to mistake——"

"Oh! now I understand it all!" ejaculated the Prince, unable to suppress a laugh at Mr. Page's expense. "But I thought you were a commercial traveller? What are you doing at Stamford Manor?"

"I have retired from the '*the road*,' may it please your Royal Highness," answered Page; "and having recently formed the acquaintance and now enjoying the friendship and confidence of Sir Richard Stamford——"

"After endeavouring to capture him for the sake of the reward—eh?" exclaimed the Prince, darting a look of contempt on the ex-bagman.

"Your Royal Highness must not view my conduct harshly, without knowing all the particulars," said Page, gravely. "It was I who enabled the baronet to escape from the custody in which certain villains held him—as well as to prove his own innocence and bring Ramsey and Martin to the scaffold. For the present, I am Sir Richard's representative here—and if I can do anything to testify my devotion towards your Royal Highness——"

"Well, the truth is," interrupted the Prince, "I need the hospitality of this house to-night for myself and this lady," he added, glancing towards his lovely companion.

"Heavens! and I have kept your Royal Highness standing all this time in the hall—and the lady too!" ejaculated Page. "Deign to walk this way."

And, throwing open a door at random—for, be it recollected, he himself was almost a complete stranger at the Manor—he stood bowing and scraping near the threshold while the Prince and the lady passed into the room, which happened to be the very one where a fire was already lighted and the supper-table laid in readiness for the behoof of the ex-bagman and Julia.

"Run and tell your wife—and *my* wife too," whispered Page hurriedly to the old gardener, "that the Prince of Wales and a lady are here, and that they must bustle about and get the best supper they can. Come—look alive!" added the ex-bagman sharply, seeing that Bryan was staring at him in stupid amazement.

Indeed, throughout the preceding dialogue between the Prince and Mr. Page, the old man had stood in speechless wonder, gazing first at the former—then at the latter—and then at the lady: for that conversation had made him aware of the astounding fact that it was not his master Sir Richard Stamford whom he saw before him, and on whom he had been lavishing his best bows and salutations—but a "Royal Highness"—a real, living, veritable "Royal Highness:"—and now he learnt, to his increased awe and amazement, that this personage was none other than the Prince of Wales, the heir-apparent to the British throne!

But upon being so sharply commanded by Mr. Page to "look alive," old Bryan felt as if he were suddenly galvanised into all the alacrity of his departed youthfulness: and hurrying off to the room where his wife and Mrs. Page were seated together conversing about the apparition of Ramsey, he communicated to them the startling intelligence that the Prince of Wales and a lady had sought the hospitality of Stamford Manor for the night.

CHAPTER CII.

A NIGHT AT STAMFORD MANOR.

In the meantime the Prince of Wales and the lady had entered the parlour and seated themselves near the hearth. The former laid aside his hat and upper coat—the latter her bonnet and furs; and they both seemed to enjoy the cheerful influence of the fire.

The lady was approaching towards forty;—but as we have already stated, she was endowed with a ravishing beauty. Her auburn hair was of exceeding richness and luxuriance: her eyes were of a deep hazel, and indescribably melting in expression. She was largely—that is, finely formed: but though her bosom rose in a superb swell, and each snowy hemisphere stood out in plump exuberance from the broad and ample chest, yet was her waist of wasp-like symmetry,—and her long arching neck and sweeping length of limb, combined with all the classic elegance of gait and gesture, imparted an air of graceful majesty to her entire appearance.

Having dismissed the old gardener in the manner already described, Mr. Page bustled about to light the lamps upon the table and the wax-candles on the mantel: he then heaped more logs upon the fire—gave a glance at the table to satisfy himself that it was laid in a becoming manner—and, in fine, afforded every indication of an intense anxiety to make himself as useful as possible to the royal visitor and his fair companion. For visions of knighthood, pensions, and sinecures were already floating in the imagination of the ex-bagman, who never missed a chance of turning particular incidents and favourable occurrences as much as possible to his own special advantage. Indeed, as the reader is already aware, he constantly had an eye fixed upon the "main chance," and never beheld anything unusual happen without instantaneously setting his wits to work to render the adventure beneficial to himself.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page, when he had poked his nose into every nook in the apartment to assure himself that nothing remained to be done for the comfort of the guests,—"I have ordered that such refreshments as the house will afford at the moment, shall be immediately got ready; and I am now waiting to receive any commands which your Royal Highness may have to give your humble servitor."

"I have little to say, Mr. Page," responded the Prince, with a smile,—"unless it be to thank you for your zeal in our behalf. The fact is," he added laconically, as if thinking that some little explana-

tion was necessary, but nevertheless giving it with the brevity and haughty curtness of an habitual reserve,—"the fact is that an accident which happened close by to our carriage, has compelled us to demand the hospitality of this mansion for the night. I am aware that it belongs to Sir Richard Stamford: but I presume, from certain observations which have fallen from your lips, that he is not here at the present time. Our acknowledgments are therefore due to you as Sir Richard's representative—and I shall feel obliged if you will order a chamber to be provided for our accommodation."

The latter portion of this sentence was delivered in a low tone and aside to the ear of the bagman, who, with characteristic keenness of perception, instantly comprehended that the Prince and his fair companion would occupy the same sleeping-room. With an obsequious bow, therefore, he retreated from the parlour, and hastened to rejoin his wife and the Bryans, whom he found all busily employed in making such preparations for the royal supper as time and materials allowed.

The excitement caused by the arrival of the Prince and a lady of extraordinary beauty, almost entirely banished the affair of the ghost from the minds of those who were now bustling about to serve up a repast worthy of the distinguished guests. Fortunately there were the roast fowl and boiled ham which Mrs. Bryan had already spoken of; and Julia, assisted by an old cookery-book which happened to be at hand, hastily prepared some sweets, there being plenty of jams and preserved fruits in the store-room The cellar furnished a supply of excellent wine; and thus the arrangements were completed to the satisfaction of Mr. Page, who superintended them all.

Then, assisted by his wife,—for he would not permit the Bryans to take any share in this portion of the ceremony, as he unceremoniously told them that their hands were too brown and grimy-looking,—the ex-bagman carried the dishes to the parlour and served them up with all the pomp and circumstance which he deemed appropriate to the occasion. The Prince and his fair companion sate down to the repast for which the night-air had sharpened their appetites; and while Mr. Page stationed himself behind the chair of the former, Julia took her post in a similar position with regard to the latter. Indeed, if the bagman had been all his life accustomed to the duties of a butler, he could not have acquitted himself more ably in that respect; and his wife, being pleased at having an opportunity of gratifying a vulgar predilection for gazing her fill upon Royalty, likewise endeavoured to render her services as acceptable as possible. The Prince and the lady conversed together upon indifferent subjects during the repast: but the former never once addressed the latter by any name—so that neither Page nor Julia obtained the slightest knowledge who she was. That she was, however, one of the heir-apparent's numerous favourites, they entertained not the least doubt; and that she was of the highest class of society, they likewise felt assured.

When the cloth was removed and Julia had retired, Mr. Page arranged upon the table the decanters of wine and several dishes of preserved fruits, apples, and filberts; and having replenished the hearth with fresh logs, he was about to leave the room, when the Prince said, "I presume that Sir Richard Stamford has broken up his establishment here since the terrible occurrences to which the newspapers have given publicity?"

"Such is the fact, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Page. "For some time past there has only been an old couple in the house to take care of it; and I and my wife came here this evening to look over the baronet's private papers, preparatory to the sale which is to take place next week."

"I believe that the Manor was partially destroyed by fire—was it not?" said the lady, now addressing herself to the ex-bagman for the first time during the evening.

"A fire did occur, madam," replied Page, quite delighted by the winning condescension of her manner and the dulcet music of her voice: "but it did little harm and was speedily extinguished. The effects are scarcely visible outside, and are chiefly confined, I fancy, to the room where the fire occurred."

"The two Aylesbury bankers, Sir Richard's partners, were both executed, I believe—were they not?" inquired the Prince.

"They were, your Royal Highness," answered the ex-traveller. "But whether or not one of them managed to come to life again—or whether his spirit haunts these premises, I cannot say. Certain it is, however, that both my wife and myself saw Mr. Ramsey this very evening in the library, as plainly as I have now the honour to behold your Royal Highness."

"It would only require the circumstance of our taking refuge in a haunted house, to render the romance of our adventure complete," observed the Prince, addressing himself with a significant smile to the lady, who laughed and blushed at the same time.

"Your Royal Highness will of course be inclined to treat my story with disbelief, and perhaps with contempt," pursued Page; "but I can assure your Royal Highness that if it were not Ramsey whom I and my wife saw this evening, it was some one so exceedingly like him that even the resemblance which Sir Richard Stamford bears to your Royal Highness is excelled and outvied in this instance. And as a proof that imagination had nothing to do with the affair, I must beg to add that Mrs. Page and I were both struck with the conviction that it was Ramsey before we had even exchanged an idea or questioned each other as to our respective impressions concerning what we did see."

"But as a sensible man, Mr. Page," said the heir-apparent, "you do not actually and positively believe that you have seen a ghost?"

"I should be sorry to declare most positively that I had—and I can scarcely bring myself to affirm that I have not," responded the ex-bagman. "I saw Ramsey executed—I saw him hang for the usual time—I saw him cut down——"

"And did you see him buried?" demanded the Prince, with a smile: for he was in a particularly good humour on the present occasion, and Mr. Page's manner and discourse somewhat amused him.

"Well—to speak candidly, I did *not* see him buried," was the response to the question just put. "The corpse was claimed, as I understood, by some friends——"

"Oh! pray let us discontinue this topic!" ex-

claimed the lady, shuddering visibly. "I cannot bear to read or think of public executions and all the dread paraphernalia of the gibbet. Depend upon it, Mr. Page, you and your wife were the victims of some optical delusion—or else some practical joke——"

"Pardon me, madam," interrupted Page: "it could not be a delusion, for the reason I have already mentioned—and there was no one in the house at the time who would play us a trick. Ramsey was a man whose personal appearance could not fail to produce an impression upon the mind. Once seen, he was not likely to be forgotten."

"He was very handsome, I believe?" observed the Prince. "At, least, so the newspapers said."

"And they spoke truly, may it please your Royal Highness," returned Mr. Page, who, however much he disliked garrulity in others, was terribly prone to it himself. "Mr. Ramsey was about eight-and-twenty—tall in stature—slightly but elegantly made—with features perfectly regular and of a Grecian cast—splendid dark eyes—brilliant teeth—and an olive complexion."

"It was almost a pity to give such a man up to the hangman," observed the Prince. "But we will discontinue the subject now, if you please," he added, at the same time giving a gentle inclination of his head as a hint that Mr. Page might withdraw.

The ex-traveller accordingly hastened to rejoin his wife and the Bryans; and when he entered the room where they were, he found them busily engaged in examining something which Julia was holding close to the candle. So deeply absorbed were they in the contemplation of the object of such enthralling interest, that they did not immediately observe the entrance of Mr. Page; and he had already thrust his head over his wife's shoulder to see what she had got in her hand, ere his presence was remarked. Then she gave a sudden start, and the Bryans uttered ejaculations of terror—while Page caught a glimpse of a miniature portrait of Ramsey!

"Dear me, how you have frightened us!" cried Julia, petulantly. "What made you come creeping in so stealthily?"

"I didn't," answered Page. "'Twas your being so intent on this picture, that you could not hear my footsteps. Where did you get it?"

And as he asked this question, he took the miniature from Julia's hand and examined it with attention. The likeness was perfect: no one who had ever seen Ramsey even for a single moment could fail to be struck by the fidelity with which his features and the very expression of his countenance in his usual mood were depicted there.

The explanation demanded was speedily given.

"The bed-chamber which was originally prepared for us," said Julia, addressing herself to her husband, "is the best in the mansion; and I therefore resolved that it should be appropriated to the use of the Prince and his lady. Well, then, it was necessary to get another room ready for you and me; and so Mrs. Bryan showed me through several chambers that I might select the one I fancied. When I had made my choice, we began to arrange the bed; and, lo and behold! between the mattresses we found this miniature."

"Ah! it doubtless belonged to Lady Stamford," observed Page. "The resemblance to Ramsey is admirably preserved—it is a speaking likeness! No wonder that her ladyship should have loved him as she did—he was a very handsome man. But, by the bye," he ejaculated, a sudden thought striking him, "the Prince has been talking to me about him; and I will just take the liberty of showing his Royal Highness this portrait."

To the presence of the heir-apparent and the lady did Mr. Page accordingly return; and, with numerous apologies for his intrusion, he explained his motive by producing the miniature. Even in the minds of the well-educated and the enlightened, there always exists a degree of interest—whether morbid or not, we leave our readers to determine—respecting those individuals who have gained an infamous renown alike by their crimes and the death whereby they have expiated them: and this fact will account for the attention with which his Royal Highness now contemplated the portrait of Ramsey. Nor less did the lady exhibit a degree of interest in the examination of those features which were truly of that classic beauty described by the ex-bagman; and as she returned the picture to Mr. Page, she observed, "Crime is not written upon that countenance: not a single lineament denotes an evil propensity. Surely the phrenologist, who studies the features as an index to the mind, must often err?"

"Undoubtedly," answered the Prince. "We thank you, Mr. Page, for your attention in bringing that portrait for our inspection; and for my part I must admit that it is indeed a countenance which, once seen, could not be easily forgotten. However, your ghost-story will not prevent me from sleeping soundly to-night—for I am overcome with weariness: and we will therefore retire to rest."

Page bowed—thrust the miniature into his pocket—and withdrew for the purpose of sending Julia to conduct the heir-apparent and his fair companion to the chamber prepared for their reception. Mrs. Page had already made herself acquainted with the arrangements of the mansion: and she was therefore enabled to act the part of guide to the distinguished visitors. Carrying a wax-candle in each hand, she preceded them to their apartment, where she offered her assistance in respect to the night-toilette of the lady, the Prince retiring into the adjacent dressing-room: but the proposal was declined with a condescending smile and a few words of thanks—and Mrs. Page withdrew to the chamber prepared for herself and husband.

When this worthy couple were alone together, the ex-bagman did not immediately commence laying aside his apparel: but, flinging himself into a great arm-chair, he said, "I think, my dear Julia, that our attentions have made some impression upon his Royal Highness and that lady."

"Very probably," answered his wife in a laconic manner: then, after a few moments' silence, she added, "But if you ever hope to obtain anything from the Prince's goodnature, depend upon it you are woefully mistaken. He is notoriously the most ungrateful man alive. I wish we could find out who that lady is."

"Why so?" demanded Page.

"Simply because I have an idea that there's some little intrigue or love affair going on in that quarter, which we might turn to our own advantage," said Julia. "That lady wears a wedding-ring on her finger—and yet we know she is not the Prince's wife. Besides, in the corner of her white cambric pocket-handkerchief there is a small coronet stamped in gold-leaf or something of the kind; and so I sup-

pose she is a woman of high rank. I saw the coronet quite plain while I was standing behind her at dinner-time. And then, don't you think that if there wasn't some reason for keeping her name secret, the Prince would have alluded to her otherwise than as '*this lady*.' Of course he would."

"You are admirably sharp-witted, Julia!" exclaimed Mr. Page, delighted with his wife's penetration. "These points that you have mentioned are very important indeed."

"To be sure they are," returned the young woman: "and if you could only find out who this lady is, there's no telling how many thousands of pounds we might get to bribe us to secrecy."

"But how can I manage? What do you suggest?" demanded Page.

"There's only one way that I know of," responded Julia; "and that is to listen at the door of their room. Ten to one but what you will be able to glean from their conversation something to put you on the right scent."

"By Jove! it shall be done," ejaculated the ex-traveller, bounding from his seat. "We have lost the precious documents containing the correspondence between your late kinswoman Hannah and Lady Stamford: but we won't let this new opportunity of feathering our nest slip through our fingers. Which is the room where the Prince and his fair lady are to pass the night?"

"The second door on the other side of the passage," answered Julia.

"All right," said Page, putting off his shoes: then, carefully issuing from the chamber, he stole noiselessly along the corridor until he reached the vicinage of the Prince's apartment. Julia stood holding the light at the threshold of her own room until she saw that her husband had reached the proper destination: she then withdrew, closing the door—so that a profound darkness now reigned in the passage.

And silence prevailed throughout the mansion.

But in a few minutes Mr. Page, whose ear was closely applied to the key-hole, heard a door open within the chamber; and, rightly conceiving it to be a sign that the Prince had emerged from the dressing-room adjoining, he now listened with a breathless attention. Nor did he long play the eaves-dropper in vain: for the Prince and his fair companion began to converse.

"My dearest Georgiana," said his Royal Highness, "how superbly beautiful you appear to-night. Never were you more truly handsome in my eyes!"

"Flatterer!" exclaimed the lady, with a laugh which resounded softly and deliciously merry as musical pearls: "into what temptation have you not led me? But seriously speaking, my dear Prince—do you really feel assured that there is no danger to be apprehended from the prying eyes of that conceited, forward, impudent man who thrust his attentions so officiously upon us?"

"Not the slightest, my beautiful Georgiana," answered his Royal Highness: and the murmurs of soft and billing kisses were wafted to the ears of Mr. Page, who had winced somewhat under the startling epithets which the lady, little suspecting he was so near, had lavished upon him.

"You are certain that he did not recognise me?" said Georgiana, after a short pause.

"Quite confident," responded the Prince. "I watched him narrowly while he was first surveying you—which he did, by the bye, like an insolent rascal as he is: and I am sure that he no more suspects you to be the Duchess of Devonshire than I believe him to be the Emperor of China. No, my lovely Georgiana—make your mind perfectly easy upon that head. Had he known you—had he recognised you when we first entered this house, I should have instantly addressed you by your name and title—and *then* we should have been compelled to occupy separate chambers to-night. Oh! what a punishment that would have been to me, charming and fascinating creature that you are! But, gracious heaven! what noise is that?" suddenly exclaimed his Royal Highness in a tone of alarm.

And at the same instant a scream burst from the lips of the Duchess of Devonshire.

Page was rivetted to the spot: his ear was nailed to the key-hole. He could not have run away, even if he had wished. The sound which had terrified the Prince and Duchess, whatever it might have been, was assuredly *within* the room, and not caused either by himself at the door or any one else outside. In fact no noise of any kind reached Page's ear; and he was therefore completely ignorant of the cause of the alarm inside the apartment. And his curiosity and suspense were equal to his ignorance on this point.

But, hark! rapid and apparently angry whispering is going on within the chamber. Page holds his breath—a pin might be heard to drop in the passage, so fearful is he that even the rustling of his clothes should prevent him from catching an idea of what is progressing on the other side of that door. Vain, however, are his attempts—useless all his strainings to distinguish the words that are spoken. He can hear the voice of the Prince—then that of the Duchess of Devonshire. The former speaks in anger—the latter in terror. And yet they are not addressing each other—nor quarrelling together. No—*there is evidently a third person in that room!*

The incidents which brought Mr. Page to this conviction all passed in the space of a minute—or rather the whispering was characterised by that variety of intonation which caused the certainty to spring up in his mind that there was a *third* voice mingling therein. But this third individual, whoever it were—and whether male or female Page knew not—spoke in so low a key that it seemed merely the murmuring of the wind: then the Prince spoke again—then the Duchess of Devonshire—and then this third person interrupted them suddenly. Hark! the voice is louder now: it is a man's! Yes—there is no longer any doubt on that head: but the voice is not familiar to the eaves-dropper. He does not recognise it. That it is not the gruff coarse voice of the old gardener, he however feels assured. Who, then, can the third person in that room be?—and what is the meaning of this strange, romantic, and darkly mysterious incident?

Still does Mr. Page listen. He is bewildered—astounded. The thought of quitting his place at that door does not once enter his head: the probability that some one may suddenly issue forth never strikes him. He is absorbed—totally absorbed—in all that is passing within,—or rather, in as much of it as he can comprehend.

And this, as far as the rapidly-whispered discourse goes, is nothing at all. Not a single sentence

can he distinguish—not a word can he catch. Vague and uncertain whisperings rustle and murmur as it were upon his ears: but their sense is lost to him——their meaning reaches him not. Now he knows that the Prince is speaking—now he can tell that the Duchess of Devonshire has taken up the discourse—and then he is aware that the *other individual* is talking in his turn.

Thus does this strange trialogue continue for upwards of ten minutes. Page strains with all his moral energies—with all his vital powers, to catch the significance of the discourse. He moves not a limb—he stirs not a muscle—and yet he is struggling as it were with a desperate energy. The perspiration pours off him, although the night air in that long passage is icy cold. Oh! if he could only catch a sentence—a word—a syllable—it might afford him a key to all the rest! But, no—the whispering is continued rapidly and with excitement: an occasional ejaculation of wonder, anger, or terror—Page knows not which—bursts from the Prince and the Duchess;—and then the third voice enjoins silence with a "Hush!" that rustles like a low wind amidst the dead leaves of the forest.

There is something awfully mysterious in all this—and by degrees a vague and undefined terror creeps over the eaves-dropper. The adventure in the library flashes back to his mind: in the midst of that deep darkness which envelopes him, he fears lest the cold hand of Ramsey's corpse should be suddenly laid upon him. Alarm grows on him rapidly. He cannot reason within himself against his augmenting terrors. The icy chill of superstitious dread circles round him—expands over his form—seizes on his entire being—penetrates to his very heart's core. He would rise from his kneeling posture—Oh! he would rise and flee precipitately—but his limbs refuse to perform their office—he is frozen with horror that increases every moment: he feels like a statue of marble animated with the mind of a man!

At this crisis—when he felt as if his brain were beginning to reel, and he ceased to perceive whether the whispering inside the room was going on or not—he was suddenly recalled, or rather startled back into recollection by the momentary shaking of the handle of the door, as if somebody had grasped it within and was about to turn it.

Springing to his feet, as if under the influence of galvanism, Page stepped back and then leant motionless against the wall.

The rustling of his clothes had scarcely ceased, when the door opened—and a man came cautiously forth.

Page held his breath: but in the pitchy darkness which prevailed, he could neither see nor be seen. No light flashed forth from the door during the instant that it was thus unclosed to allow the individual egress: and it was shut again in a moment. But Page knew, by the tread of the boots upon the oaken floor of the passage, as the person issued from the room, that it *was* a man: besides, who could it be but that *third individual* whose voice had completed the whispered trialogue?

Page, we said, held his breath—and the man, whoever he were, paused for a few instants outside the door, apparently to listen if all were still. Then, stealing cautiously along the passage, he proceeded towards the stairs which he descended with equal carefulness. At length the sounds of his footsteps ceased altogether.

The ex-bagman now crept noiselessly back to his own chamber, where he narrated to Julia all that had occurred. She was as much astonished as he had been at the incident: but the main point being accomplished,—namely, the discovery that the Prince's fair companion was none other than the high-born and splendid Duchess of Devonshire,—Mrs. Page chose rather to speculate upon what benefit the knowledge of this secret might produce, than on the more mysterious event which defied all conjecture.

At an early hour on the following morning a plain carriage, attended by only one footman in addition to the coachman, drove up to the front-door of Stamford Manor. The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Devonshire then came forth from their chamber, and were met at the head of the stairs by Mr. and Mrs. Page, the former of whom inquired whether it would please his Royal Highness to partake of breakfast. An answer in the negative was given: but the Prince expressed his thanks for the hospitality he had received — and, putting ten guineas into Page's hand, desired him to give them to the dependants of the mansion.

His Royal Highness then handed the Duchess of Devonshire into the carriage, and entering it after her, gave some whispered instructions to the footman, who bowed respectfully—closed the door—and sprang up to his place by the side of the coachman. The next moment the vehicle was rolling rapidly away from Stamford Manor.

Mr. Page presented the Bryans with a guinea, alleging in a pompous speech that the Prince had desired that it might be bestowed upon them as a mark of his satisfaction at the treatment he had received; and the unsophisticated old couple, never dreaming that they were being robbed as coolly and impudently as if it were upon the highway, were profoundly delighted and grateful. The astute Mr. Page accordingly pocketed nine guineas by the little transaction.

In the course of the day, he and his wife, having completed their business at Stamford Manor, took their leave of the Bryans and walked across the fields to Aylesbury, whence they procured a conveyance for Windsor.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE VEILED LADY.

THE reader will be pleased to recollect that the grand ball at Carlton House, on the occasion when Pauline Clarendon was presented to the Prince of Wales, took place on a Monday evening. It was on the following morning that Mr. Clarendon received the mysterious visit from the veiled lady, who, on taking leave of him, had expressed herself in these terms:—"For the remainder of this week and throughout the next shall I each morning look into the *Times* newspaper: if no communication be made to me through its advertising columns, I shall conclude that you are a mere grumbler who dares not act—a poltroon who can complain but who lacks the energy necessary to improve his condition and accomplish his desires. On the other hand, if a communication should appear in that journal, addressed to the '*Veiled Lady*,' it will instantaneously be attended to."

We must now observe that the remainder of the week in which the visit was paid by this veiled lady to Mr. Clarendon, passed away—and no advertisement of the nature specified appeared in the *Times* newspaper. On the following Sunday night was it that the Magsman kept his appointment with the masked nobleman in Hyde Park: on the ensuing Wednesday morning was it that the Prince of Wales had the party of dancing-girls at Carlton House, and received a visit from his royal father;—and on the Thursday night it was that the incidents related in the preceding chapter occurred at Stamford Manor. The reader will thus perceive that although the incidents which have occupied the last twenty-seven chapters, have been varied and numerous, yet that the time occupied in the action of this portion of our drama has only been ten days: and therefore the time prescribed by the veiled lady in her farewell speech to Mr. Clarendon, had not yet quite expired.

But it was now Friday morning—and Mr. Clarendon had but this one day to decide whether he should seek an interview with the veiled lady or not: for if he determined in the affirmative, it was necessary to send the advertisement for publication in the *Times* of the next morning.

Again, therefore, do we find him in his study, pondering upon the position of his affairs: and, as he pressed his hand to his throbbing brows, it was thus that his musings ran:—

"Why do I vacillate thus?—why have I hesitated to summon that mysterious lady to my presence by the means of communication which she pointed out? Octavia refused the proposal of marriage which Arthur Eaton made to her: and she was wrong—foolish—insensate! Such an alliance would have been most advantageous to her—most beneficial to me. It would have given her a position as good as that which Pauline will shortly attain when she becomes Lady Florimel: and it would have ensured the continuation of a handsome independence to myself. But she refused — refused to espouse her cousin, simply because she did not love him! At least such was the reason she gave: yet I almost begin to imagine that there is some truth in the suspicions which Arthur expressed to me ere he made her the offer of his hand. Yes—it is probable that she loves another. But who can the object of her affections be? I cannot even conjecture. And now, since Wednesday morning she has been staying with the Duchess of Devonshire, whose acquaintance she formed I scarcely know how. There must be something very fascinating in the girl that she should have thus made herself so influential and valuable a friend: and it would be heart-breaking indeed, were she to throw herself away upon any penniless or untitled individual, merely in obedience to the sickly sentimentalism which young maidens denominate *love*. But how am *I* to act?—for *that* is the question. This veiled lady who paid me so mysterious a visit last Tuesday week, is evidently well acquainted with all my affairs. She emphatically observed that she knew my position to be painful and intolerable to a degree; and she hinted—nay, more than hinted, at the possibility of placing me on that eminence to which my ambition aspires. Can she read, then, the secret of my heart?—has she penetrated with eagle glance into my soul and beheld the cravings that rack me—the anxious longings which I cherish for those honours that at one time seemed almost within my grasp? Yes—and should I not obey that unaccountable and mysterious presentiment which her visit excited in my brain,—a presentiment teaching me that I had reached some point or crisis in my destiny which would give a colour to all the rest of my existence! Oh! assuredly I must see this veiled lady once more. I can but hear her proposals and listen to the conditions upon which she has offered to aid me. If they be agreeable, I can accept them: if they be repugnant to my feelings, I can reject them."

Having thus made up his mind how to act, Mr Clarendon wrote a single line upon a slip of paper, which he forthwith took to the office of the *Times* newspaper.

Reader, have you not frequently observed the strange, mysterious, and often deeply affecting advertisements which appear at the top of the second column on the front page of the *Times?* The death-bed has known no anguish and the churchyard no misery greater than the affliction which so often prompts the insertion of a few lines in that place. By those means, the deserted wife implores her husband to return to the home which his absence has left desolate, and to the children whom his flight has made beggars: or else it is the husband who beseeches a guilty wife to go back for her innocent offspring's sake, and all shall be forgiven! And by those means, also, does the criminal who is playing at hide-and-seek with the officers of justice, communicate to his friends that intelligence which he dares not entrust to the post-office; or the bailiff-hunted debtor adopts this medium to acknowledge the receipt of some pecuniary assistance which an indulgent relative had forwarded to an address specified, that address being not however the recipient's home. That small space in the *Times* newspaper—that nook of a couple of square inches—often contains a whole world of wild and harrowed feelings. It is the modern Temple of Delphi to which the heart flies to seek for those oracles of hope which are lost elsewhere: but, alas! how often does it prove the Morgue where appalling suspense becomes changed into the conviction of overwhelming sorrow!

And it was in this place in the *Times* newspaper that the following brief advertisement appeared upon the Saturday morning:—

TO THE VEILED LADY.—Another and immediate interview is requested by C.

Mr. Clarendon rose at an earlier hour than usual on this morning, which he felt was destined to be a memorable one in the history of his life. An unnatural excitement imparted a hectic flush to his usually sallow cheeks; and a wild gleaming light shone in his restless eyes.

At any other time Pauline would have noticed her father's altered appearance, and would have affectionately inquired the cause: but on the present occasion she also was absorbed in her own reflections, which were not of a pleasurable nature. And, like her father too, did she endeavour to conceal the pre-occupation of her mind: thus were parent and daughter to a certain extent practising duplicity towards each other. Few observations were exchanged at the breakfast table; and the moment he had partaken of a cup of chocolate,—for the more substantial food remained untasted by him,—Mr. Clarendon repaired to his study.

At eleven o'clock on that forenoon a loud double knock and a ring at the front door resounded through the house. Pauline hastened to the window of the front parlour and peeped from behind the curtain in a manner denoting the most acute anxiety and suspense: but when she observed that there was no carriage at the door and that the arrival was a lady on foot, she heaved a profound sigh—turned away from the casement—and reseating herself on the sofa, fell into a train of gloomy reflections.

But upon Mr. Clarendon that knock and ring produced the startling influence of galvanism; and bounding from his chair, he stood in trembling expectation of beholding the mysterious being whom he had adjured to appear.

Nor was he disappointed: for in a few moments the veiled lady stood before him.

Penetrating and piercing was the glance which he threw upon her, in order, if possible, to obtain a glimpse of her features: but, no—the thick black veil was still so folded as to render it impossible for him to gratify his curiosity. Nevertheless, as his looks swept her form, he beheld all that symmetrical grace of outline and all that beauty of proportion which had struck him on the former occasion of her visit; and a straggling curl, escaping from beneath the veil and lying on the sloping shoulder, showed that her hair was of a rich dark, glossy brown.

Mr. Clarendon placed a chair for her accommodation, and then resuming his own seat, observed, "You saw my advertisement in this morning's *Times?*"

"Otherwise I should not be here," promptly answered the lady, in that musical voice which nature never meant to waft any other language than that of love, and peace, and gaiety. "You have pondered well upon the discourse which took place between us last Tuesday week?"

"I have," returned Mr. Clarendon. "Pray come to the point at once—be explicit—And relieve me

from suspense. What do you know of my affairs?—what can you do for me?—and who are you?"

"I know everything concerning you, Mr. Clarendon," rejoined the lady; "not only your position—but likewise your secret thoughts. When I was with you on the former occasion, I read your soul thoroughly and comprehended your character well. You are ambitious—and your longings may be gratified, if you have the courage to enter upon the course which I shall point out."

"And that course?" said Mr. Clarendon, trembling with agitation.

"Is not free from crime," answered the lady, in a resolute tone: and, as she leant slightly forward, it seemed to Mr. Clarendon that her eyes shone with a sinister lustre even through the thick folds of the black veil.

"Crime!—crime!" murmured the ambitious man: "is the world, then, so constituted that nothing can be done without crime? But there are degrees in crime, lady," he said aloud, and addressing himself directly to her.

"He who aspires to great things, must not hesitate to commit great crimes," was the startling response: and the voice which gave utterance to these ferocious words was suitably stern and merciless in its tone.

"Great crimes!" repeated Mr. Clarendon. "Yes—to wrong the orphan or rob the widow—to plunder the confiding and the unprotected,—these are great crimes: but——"

"But they are nothing in comparison with the deeds which men must often perpetrate to gain a special end," exclaimed the lady. "Forgery is a greater crime than any you have named; and *murder*," she added, sinking her voice to a low whisper, so that her words came hissing through the veil as if it were a serpent's head that were concealed behind it,—"*murder* is the greatest crime of all!"

"Murder!" repeated Mr. Clarendon, his whole frame convulsing with a shudder that was perfectly visible. "Who art thou, temptress?—why dost thou come hither to try me?—what dost thou mean?"

"Listen," said the lady, with imperturbable calmness and self-possession. "Suppose that you were walking in company with the Hon. Arthur Eaton along the brink of a tremendous precipice overlooking the sea; and suppose that no eye saw you save that of God—and you were well convinced that human suspicion would never attach itself to you, but that you might continue to hold your head erect——"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed Mr. Clarendon: "I understand you but too well. Great heaven! what feeling is this that prompts me to fall into your views—that impels me to rush blindly into the course which you are already developing with a dim yet horrible significancy——"

"Oh! give not way to a maudlin sentimentalism," cried the lady, in a tone of contempt: "but proclaim yourself at once a man who is able to resolve sternly and act courageously. I say, then—would you, in the case which I propounded, thrust forth your hand and hurl from the precipice the only human being who stands between yourself and a proud title with a princely fortune?"

"Who are you that ask this question?" demanded Clarendon, rising from his seat. "What guarantee have I that no treachery is intended by your visit—that no snare is laid for me by your language?"

"The guarantee that there are no witnesses to our discourse, and that you could indignantly deny any averments I might choose to make publicly respecting the particulars of this interview. This is your guarantee," added the lady, emphatically.

"True!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon. "Well—I will yield to the current which is already beginning to bear me along—I will throw myself entirely upon your honour and mercy—and I will confess all that you desire me to admit. Now do you understand me?—and are you satisfied?"

"I understand that you will not hesitate at *any* crime which may be necessary to accomplish certain aims," said the lady: "promise me *this*—and I shall be satisfied."

"I promise," answered Mr. Clarendon, in a tone rendered firm by the desperation of a soul suddenly nerved to accomplish any turpitude: "nay more—I swear!"

"Good!" exclaimed the lady, in a voice expressive of that deep concentrated satisfaction which a tigress might be supposed to feel after feasting her ravenous maw on human flesh. "And now listen to the terms on which I offer to serve you. But start not—the condition is a singular one—and it is——"

"Name it—name it!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his suspense being once more raised to a feverish pitch. "What is this condition?"

"That you marry me!" was the reply.

"Woman, you are mad—or you are making a cruel mockery of my feelings!" cried Mr. Clarendon, springing from his seat.

"I never was more serious in my life," observed the lady, in that calm, imperturbable tone which bespoke alike the remorseless nature of her disposition and the strength of her character. "Resume your seat—and listen attentively."

Mr. Clarendon sate down accordingly.

"The Hon. Arthur Eaton," continued the lady, "stands between you and the Marchmont peerage. Consequently his removal from the theatre of this world is necessary to *your* interests. On the other hand, his death can alone appease the now insatiate vengeance which I entertain towards him. But *you* cannot make him your victim without practising violence or stratagem—and in either case suspicion may fall upon you: and *I* am powerless, so long as I remain unaided and alone. But *together*, we may accomplish our purpose; and the same result which ministers to *your* ambition, gratifies *my* revenge. Now, Mr. Clarendon, do you comprehend me?"

"I do," was the gloomy answer. "But what happiness, think you, will result from an alliance such as this which you propose that we should form?"

"Happiness!" ejaculated the lady, in a tone of ineffable contempt: "what care we for domestic happiness? Our aims are of a higher nature and have a grander scope. *You* have your ambition to gratify—*I* my vengeance: *you* will attain the object of your desires—*I* shall reach mine. These ends once accomplished, what matters it whether we suit each other as husband and wife? On the contrary, let us each pursue our own course according to our respective fancy and taste. Have you your mistresses, should it so please you: but blame me not if I likewise have my lovers. But should it chance that we experience an affection for each other,—should your courage in executing our purpose win my heart, and should my beauty captivate you,—well, so much the better! For I *am* beautiful—

exceedingly beautiful—at least the world says so: and on that score you will not be ashamed of your wife."

"But this implacable vengeance which you cherish against Arthur Eaton," said Mr. Clarendon,—"whence did it arise?—how has he provoked your hatred?"

"Would you know the truth?" she exclaimed, with a laugh which sounded wild and savage from behind that thick black veil. "Oh! it is a strange secret for a woman to reveal to the man whom she invites to marry her! Nevertheless, I am not disposed to stand upon any false delicacy in these negotiations which are now progressing between us. In a word, then, Mr. Clarendon," she added, her voice becoming suddenly hoarse and thick, "Arthur Eaton seduced me—and I have sworn to wreak a deadly vengeance upon him!"

"Methought that he loved—at least at one time—a certain Miss Fernanda Aylmer?" said Clarendon: "surely—surely, you cannot be the niece of the Earl of Desborough?"

"There is no need for farther disguise nor mystery," exclaimed the lady. "Yes—I am Fernanda Aylmer!"

And she threw back the dark veil—thus revealing to the eyes of Mr. Clarendon that beauteous countenance which seemed as unfit to express the working of all the darkest passions of the human soul as the blushing rose to bear the slime of the snail upon its bloom.

The snowy skin and the scarlet lip—the luxuriant brown hair and the deep violet eyes—the proudly-rising throat and the well developed but not exuberant bust—the exquisitely chiselled nose and the pearly teeth—the high forehead softly veined, and the classically rounded chin,—these were the charms which constituted the whole glory of dazzling beauty that burst upon the sight of Mr. Clarendon.

He had heard of Miss Aylmer on many occasions: but he had never seen her face until now. And when it was thus revealed to him, his first feeling was one of joy and pleasure at the idea of possessing such a bride: his second was an emotion of mingled horror and dread at the thought of taking to his bosom a snake with so lovely a skin. But again, and all in a moment, did his sentiments undergo a transition—and heeding only the glittering prize of a coronet which by *her* agency appeared to be within his reach, the infatuated votary of ambition smiled with ineffable satisfaction as he took her hand, saying, "Fernanda, you are adorable—and I already love you!"

"Then, as we have come to so perfect an understanding on all points," exclaimed Miss Aylmer, "let there be no delay in affording each other the proper guarantees of our mutual sincerity. The distance is not great from hence to Doctors' Commons—a license can be procured there in a few minutes—and at the private residence of some clergyman in the neighbourhood may our hands be joined in matrimonial bonds. Come, Mr. Clarendon—do you hesitate?"

"Not at all," was the reply. "But I was thinking that the abruptness of this step would surprise the world—my daughters too——"

"We care nothing for the world," interrupted Fernanda, petulantly: "and as for your daughters—dare they look coldly upon their father, or superciliously upon the mother-in-law whom he may introduce to them?"

"Assuredly not," answered Mr. Clarendon. "But there is still another objection which I am compelled to urge against the precipitation of this step——"

"Speak — speak!" ejaculated Fernanda, impatiently.

"You are probably aware that my income depends wholly and solely upon the generosity of Lord Marchmont," continued Mr. Clarendon; "and should he take offence at this marriage—or should his son Arthur conceive that such an alliance is at least fraught with suspicion, if not actual menace towards himself——"

"In that case you will lose your income—is it not so?" exclaimed Fernanda: then, without waiting for a reply, she observed, "But you may make yourself perfectly easy upon that head. I am not without friends or resources."

"Yes—I am well aware that your uncle the Earl of Desborough is rich," said Mr. Clarendon: "but I was fearful that, should *he* likewise disapprove of this match, your own means would be dried up as well as my own."

"I care not the value of a grain of sand for either Lord or Lady Desborough," returned Miss Aylmer; "and, thank heaven! I am not dependent upon their bounty. In Lord Montgomery I possess a generous relative and kind friend—and for many months past he has supplied my purse without even inquiring the purposes for which I have needed considerable sums of gold. Look!" she exclaimed, drawing forth several Bank-notes from the bosom of her dress and displaying them before the eyes of Mr. Clarendon: "here are two thousand pounds—and this amount will last us a considerable time. When it is gone, my cousin Lord Montgomery will not fail to act as my banker."

"But how know you that even *he* may approve of this marriage?" demanded Mr. Clarendon.

"I know that he will not disapprove of anything that I may do in order to forward my own interests or aims," answered Miss Aylmer, in a decided tone. "Are all your objections now set at rest?—or have you any farther scruples to get rid of?"

"None," responded Mr. Clarendon, yielding to the force of circumstances—or rather to the temptations thrown in his way—with the desperate firmness of a man who surrenders up his soul to Satan.

Miss Aylmer replaced the veil over her countenance and quitted the house, Mr. Clarendon undertaking to meet her in a few minutes in Portland Place. His toilette was then hurriedly performed; and, without breathing a word of his intentions to his daughter Pauline, he hastened to join his intended bride at the spot where she was waiting for him. A hackney-coach was immediately summoned; and the driver received orders to repair direct to Doctors' Commons.

CHAPTER CIV.

PAULINE.

We have already stated that Pauline was too much absorbed in her own mournful reflections to notice the excited manner of her father on this memorable morning. We have also observed that when Fernanda Aylmer knocked at the door, the young maiden hurried to the window and was disappointed

when she found that the arrival was not the one which she was evidently awaiting in deep suspense.

Resuming her seat upon the sofa, the beauteous Pauline gave way to her sorrowful meditations: but from time to time she looked at her watch—that very watch which Lady Desborough had presented to her at the villa in the Edgeware Road.

At length she observed that it was mid-day—and the excitement of suspense and impatience was becoming intolerable.

Drawing forth a note from her bosom, she read it with attention; and the tears fell from her eyes, moistening the page with their pearly shower.

The contents of this letter were as follow:—

"*Carlton House, Wednesday afternoon.*

"My Dear Miss Pauline,

"I regret—deeply regret—to be compelled to address you upon a most unpleasant subject: but I implore you to tranquillise yourself and listen to the good counsel which Lord Florimel will give you. Poor Octavia called upon me just now. That she was about to take this step, you were doubtless aware. Need I assure you that I received her with kindness—and that I said all I could to console her? But her excitement grew alarming; and she became very ill. Fortunately the Duchess of Devonshire arrived at the moment; and her Grace (with whom I am charmed to find that you are acquainted) volunteered to take charge of the dear girl. To this proposal I readily assented, fearful that if Octavia were conveyed home immediately, your father would inevitably discover all! The Duchess of Devonshire has therefore taken your dear sister to a secluded villa which her Grace possesses at a little distance from London; and there can be no doubt that in two or three days Octavia will be completely restored to health. The moment her Grace had departed with your sister, I sent for Lord Florimel, to whom I candidly narrated what had occurred,—deeming him to be the most proper person to break the intelligence to you, and advise with you how to account to your father for Octavia's temporary absence from home. His lordship kindly and promptly undertook this task: but he requested me to pen a few lines to you, of which he offered to become the bearer. Hence this brief note.

"I should add that her Grace of Devonshire has promised to visit you on Saturday next, in the forenoon—so that she may either report to you the progress which your dear sister may be making towards complete convalescence, or else have the pleasure of restoring Octavia altogether to your arms.

"That this latter alternative may be the one which next Saturday morning will see accomplished, is a wish that comes from the heart of

"Your affectionate friend,
"GEORGE P."

Such was the letter from the Prince of Wales which Pauline Clarendon now read. As the reader may observe by the heading, it was written on the preceding Wednesday afternoon—a couple of hours after the terrible scene which occurred at Carlton House in respect to Octavia.

And why did the young lady now refer to it again? Simply to assure herself that the visit of the Duchess of Devonshire was indeed promised for the forenoon of this Saturday on which we find her so anxiously awaiting the arrival of her Grace.

Scarcely had she read the contents of that page which in a few moments became moistened with her tears, when a carriage stopped at the door. Thrusting the letter in her bosom, Pauline hurried to the window; and a faint smile of satisfaction appeared upon her lips, as she beheld her devoted lover Lord Florimel descend. Another minute—and she was clasped in his arms.

"What news of Octavia, my dearest Pauline?" he demanded, leading her to a seat and placing himself by her side: then, perceiving that her countenance bore traces of recent weeping, he exclaimed, ere she had time to reply, "Alas! nothing satisfactory, I am afraid. But tell me, Pauline—has any additional intelligence reached you?"

"None, dear Gabriel," was the answer. "You are aware that the Duchess of Devonshire was to call this morning: but it is now past mid-day—and she has not yet made her appearance."

"Her Grace will be sure to come, beloved girl," said Florimel, speaking in his most soothing tone and lavishing the tenderest caresses upon the charming creature on whom his affections were so devoutly fixed. "Let us hope for the best."

"Oh! I am almost wearied of indulging in hope concerning this fatal amour of my unhappy sister with the Prince," exclaimed Pauline, reposing her beauteous head upon her lover's shoulder and pressing her hand in both her own. "I tremble for the consequences, Gabriel. What can I do, if her Grace should not come?—or how am I to act in the still more embarrassing position in which I shall be placed if Octavia do not return home well in health and comparatively tranquillised in mind? Must I not fly to her and offer the consolations of a sister?—and yet how can I leave my father unattended by either of his daughters? Moreover, such a step on my part would probably engender suspicions in his mind——"

"But he is aware that Octavia is staying with the Duchess—is he not?" inquired Florimel.

"Yes," was the answer. "He does not however suspect that she is ill—much less that she has anything so very dreadful preying upon her mind. And I feel, Gabriel, as if I were playing a treacherous and false part towards my father," continued Pauline, in a tone of deep feeling and earnest sincerity: "it seems to me that I am culpable of great duplicity and falsehood in concealing from him the real truth. Nevertheless, that truth I dare not avow: for if my father's suspicions were once excited, he would pursue his inquiries and investigation until he had fathomed the whole affair in all its lamentable details. And there is another source of uneasiness which I experience," observed Pauline, after a few moments' pause; "which is, that the real extent of Octavia's illness was not made known to me. From the moment that you delivered the Prince's letter into my hands last Wednesday afternoon, I have been tortured with misgivings to the effect that Octavia is worse than his Royal Highness represented. What did he tell you, Gabriel?—do you really believe that his note contained the entire truth, and that nothing still more unfavourable was concealed?"

"The Prince gave me precisely the same account which was contained in his letter, dear Pauline," answered Lord Florimel. "I repeated to you word for word all he said to me: but if you wish, I will tell it to you over again."

At this moment a loud double knock resounded through the house; and Pauline rushed to the window. A carriage, with a ducal coronet upon the panels, was standing at the door—and the Duchess of Devonshire immediately alighted. But she was alone—Octavia was not with her—and Pauline's heart sank with a sickening sensation in her bosom.

The Duchess was conducted to the drawing-room·

and thither did Pauline repair, leaning upon Florimel's arm—for a faintness was in all her limbs, and her spirit was crushed with a presentiment of evil.

"I am glad that you are here, Gabriel," were the first words which the Duchess uttered, as she caught sight of the young nobleman: then, taking Pauline's hand, she said, "My dear young friend, I shall not keep you in a state of unnecessary suspense——"

"No—no: for heaven's sake, speak!" murmured the maiden, shuddering from head to foot. "I see that your Grace has bad news for me——"

"Alas! would that I could give you some reassuring answer!" exclaimed the Duchess: "but poor Octavia is far from well—the blow has been a cruel one——"

"But she is alive?" ejaculated Pauline, in a tone of thrilling anguish, as the terrible idea flashed to her imagination that her beloved sister was no more and that the Duchess was about to break the tidings of her death as gently as possible.

"Oh! entertain not such a dreadful apprehension," cried Georgiana, penetrating her thoughts. "Yes—Octavia is alive, thank heaven—and well too in bodily health——"

"O horror! I begin to comprehend the appalling truth!" shrieked forth the wretched Pauline: "it is her reason that is affected—her senses have abandoned her! Great heaven! I understand it all now——and your Grace does not contradict the fact! Alas—alas! my poor dear ruined sister, what has thy destroyer done to thee?—what new iniquity has he perpetrated? Oh! vengeance upon his head——no, not vengeance—'tis mercy that I implore of the Prince—mercy on behalf of the ruined Octavia!"

And having given utterance to these exclamations in a wild tone, and with a countenance evincing the poignancy of the anguish which rent her soul, Pauline sank upon her knees—covered her face with her hands—and burst into an uncontrollable passion of sobs, and tears, and bitter lamentations.

"Let her weep, Gabriel—let her weep," whispered the Duchess hastily to the young nobleman, as he rushed forward to raise his well-beloved from that posture of despair. "This outpouring of her surcharged soul will relieve her."

And for some minutes Pauline continued to give way to her almost frantic sorrow.

But suddenly raising her head, though without moving from her knees, she looked up into Georgiana's countenance, exclaiming, "You have not told me whether my horrible suspicions be true! Perhaps I may be wrong—God grant that I am! Is my sister so deeply afflicted that she has lost her reason? Tell me, dear lady—oh! tell me—let me know the worst—or else give me instantaneous relief by the assurance that my fears have exaggerated the evil!"

And, as she thus spoke, the beauteous creature twined her outstretched arms round the form of the splendid Duchess of Devonshire,—every lineament of the anguished countenance expressing the intense anxiety with which the response was awaited.

"My dear girl," said her Grace, profoundly affected, "your surmise is indeed too true! But, in the name of God! tranquillise yourself——"

"No—I cannot become tranquil!" exclaimed Pauline, springing straight up like a galvanized body. "Something must now be done—a decisive course must be taken—I can deceive my father no longer! He is not at home now—but he will return presently—and then—oh! *then*," she added wildly, "I shall throw myself upon my knees before him—I shall tell him all—and I shall implore his forgiveness on behalf of my poor ruined sister!"

She paused—seated herself on the sofa—and appeared to reflect profoundly for upwards of a minute.

At length Lord Florimel approached her: and, taking her hand, he pressed it to his lips, saying, "My beloved Pauline, I beseech—I implore you to compose yourself. All may not be so bad as you imagine——"

"It is impossible that the aspect of my poor sister's position can be worse, Gabriel," interrupted the young maiden, in a tone of profound feeling; and then followed another outburst of indescribable anguish.

"Listen to me, my sweet young friend," said the Duchess of Devonshire, when the violence of this new paroxysm of Pauline's affliction had somewhat subsided: and placing herself by the young lady's side on the sofa, Georgiana took her hand with every demonstration of affection, observing, "You are endowed, Pauline, with a strong mind and excellent sense—and I am certain that you will look this misfortune courageously in the face. For that any harm which happens to your sister, becomes a misfortune to yourself, I am well aware—so great is the affection existing between you both. But what course does prudence now recommend? That the veil of secrecy shall be drawn as completely as possible around this lamentable occurrence—and that the world shall not be suffered to learn the real cause of Octavia's affliction. She is now in a comfortable retirement—surrounded by all the gentle ministrations and affectionate attentions which friendship can suggest and which her position demands. An eminent medical practitioner devotes himself to her cure; and he last evening declared to me most solemnly that in a few weeks' time her reason will be re-established, provided his regimen receive no hindrance nor interruption. It would therefore be imprudent for you, my dear Pauline, to think of visiting your sister at present. As for cherishing sentiments of vindictiveness towards the Prince of Wales, your own good sense will show you how useless and ineffectual such a project must prove,—while its only result would be to proclaim to the world your beloved sister's dishonour. Respecting your father, my dear Pauline," continued the Duchess, her tone becoming more tender and soothing as she proceeded, "I will myself undertake to communicate the distressing intelligence to him;—and I will guarantee that he shall pardon his afflicted daughter—pardon you also for having in any respect withholden from him the truth."

"Her Grace speaks fairly and kindly, Pauline," said Lord Florimel; "and you will do well to leave the matter entirely in her hands."

"Yes—I will follow your advice, dear Gabriel," returned the young maiden: "and to your ladyship," she added, addressing herself to Georgiana, "my eternal gratitude is due for all the generous interest you have taken and are still taking in this lamentable affair. But tell me about my dear

sister: is she melancholy or excited?—and where is she?"

"Octavia is at a charming little villa which I possess in Buckinghamshire, at no considerable distance from Aylesbury," replied the Duchess. "Respecting the state of her mind, I must inform you that there are times when she is dreadfully excited—and others at which she falls into a black despair."

"Poor Octavia!" murmured Pauline, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and her lovely bosom heaving with the sobs which half choked her.

"But as I have before stated," continued Georgiana, "she is under the charge not only of kind attendants, but likewise of a skilful physician; and you may be assured, my sweet young friend, that the moment Dr. Clarges gives his permission for you to visit her, I will myself come and fetch you in my carriage for that purpose."

In this manner did the Duchess of Devonshire and Lord Florimel exert themselves to sooth the afflicted mind of the younger Miss Clarendon; and in the course of an hour she became considerably tranquillised. They were then all enabled to converse more calmly and seriously upon the unhappy event which had occasioned Pauline so much sorrow; and the Duchess of Devonshire took an opportunity to hint that she was the bearer of such good tidings for Mr. Clarendon in one sense that he would be partially consoled for the evil intelligence awaiting him in another.

Thus did three hours pass away; and the timepiece on the mantel was striking four, when a hackney-coach drove up to the front-door, and Mr. Clarendon alighted.

But instead of immediately entering the house, he turned to hand a lady from the vehicle; and this fair companion, taking his arm, passed into the dwelling with him.

Another minute—and the drawing-room door being thrown open, Mr. Clarendon and Fernanda appeared upon the threshold; and the former, leading his companion towards Pauline, said, "My dear child, this lady has consented to ensure my happiness by becoming my wife: it is for you to welcome her to that home over which she will henceforth preside with the dignity, grace, and kindness natural to her character."

CHAPTER CV.

MR. CLARENDON.

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment, amounting to a positive shock, which Pauline experienced as this strange announcement fell upon her ears. The colour forsook her cheeks, and she stood motionless and pale as a statue, her eyes fixed vacantly upon Fernanda: then a crimson glow suddenly suffused her countenance—her bosom rose and fell rapidly—and her looks settled upon her father's features, as if to read the truth therein and convince herself that she was not being made the victim of a heartless joke or cruel mockery.

To Fernanda this scene, brief though it were, was far from agreeable—especially as she immediately recognised the Duchess of Devonshire and Lord Florimel, with both of whom she was acquainted; but, with characteristic self-possession and firmness, she took Pauline's hand, saying, "Have you no congratulations to offer to your father, if not to me? But we shall be friends—very good friends dear girl—when you come to know me well."

These words recalled the maiden to a sense of the necessity of demonstrating her obedience towards her parent's wishes, as well as her respect for the choice which he had made and the step which he had taken: she accordingly endeavoured to make a suitable reply to Fernanda's speech and give utterance to some words of welcome and congratulation;—but the thought suddenly flashed to her mind that while her father was bringing home a young and beauteous bride, her sister was suffering under the most cruel affliction. A torrent of tears choked her utterance—and, staggering back a few paces, she would have fallen heavily, had not Lord Florimel caught her in his arms and supported her to the sofa.

Mr. Clarendon's countenance became black with displeasure—and Fernanda turned white and red a dozen times in half a minute.

But the Duchess of Devonshire hastened to approach them, and taking the hand of the latter said, "My dear friend, I congratulate you—most sincerely congratulate you, upon the alliance which you have formed—as I have not the slightest doubt that you have therein consulted your own happiness. Being an old friend of your aunt Lady Desborough, I am naturally interested in your welfare; and I therefore rejoice that accident should have led to my being here so opportunely to offer my felicitations. You will present me to Mr. Clarendon, Fernanda," added her Grace, with a sweet smile.

The introduction took place; and the Duchess hastened to say, as she glanced towards Pauline, "Mr. Clarendon, you must not misinterpret your daughter's feelings. She is too good, dutiful, and affectionate a girl not to be contented and satisfied with any step which you may take to ensure your own happiness; and therefore the embarrassment which she evinced at first and the emotions which she is experiencing now must not be attributed to a wrong cause. The truth is, Mr. Clarendon," added Georgiana, "she has this afternoon received intelligence that is only too well calculated to afflict her; and circumstances rendered me the unwilling bearer of these evil tidings."

"Evil tidings!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, throwing a glance of anxious inquiry upon the countenance of the Duchess of Devonshire.

"Alas! it is too true," replied her Grace: "and these tidings equally regard you. But I have likewise some welcome intelligence to impart; and therefore I must crave a few minutes' interview with you alone."

Mr. Clarendon glanced towards his bride to see what effect these mysterious words on the part of the Duchess produced upon her; and it instantaneously struck the shrewd and far-seeing Georgiana that the favourable portion of what she had to communicate would materially please, as indeed it now materially interested Fernanda in her capacity as Mr. Clarendon's wife.

With admirable tact and judgment, therefore, did the Duchess of Devonshire hasten to observe, "When I say that I request an interview with *you* alone, Mr. Clarendon, I do not mean to exclude your fair bride from our conference."

Fernanda's countenance now brightened up; and

Mr. Clarendon led the way to an adjacent apartment, Lord Florimel being thus left to console his well-beloved Pauline in the drawing room.

"I have already hinted," said the Duchess of Devonshire, when she was alone with Mr. and Mrs. Clarendon, "that the nature of the communications which I have to make is two-fold. On one side there is a great calamity—on the other an amazing piece of good fortune. I will not however insult you, Mr. Clarendon, by intimating that the latter will entirely compensate for the former: but as you are a man of the world and doubtless entertain that laudable ambition which animates the breasts of all human creatures, you will doubtless perceive in the favourable tidings a certain atonement as well as solace for the evil intelligence."

"I beseech your Grace to explain yourself at once," said Mr. Clarendon, trembling all over with nervous anxiety and suspense.

"In the first place," continued the Duchess, "you must prepare to hear unpleasant news respecting your elder daughter, Octavia."

"Ah! what of her?" ejaculated Clarendon, the feelings of a father suddenly vibrating painfully to the ominous sound of words which appeared to herald the revelation of a misfortune.

"Your daughter—your elder daughter—the lovely and fascinating Octavia," said the Duchess, solemnly, "has been seduced!"

"Impossible!" cried the wretched man, bounding upon his chair as if a bullet had penetrated his heart. "She is virtue itself!"

"Alas! alas!" exclaimed Georgiana, "her virtue has yielded to the influence of love and temptation——"

"Meledictions upon the man who has blighted that fair flower!" thundered forth the enraged father, springing from his seat and gesticulating with awful vehemence.

"Stay! stay!" cried Georgiana, catching him by the arm. "He who has thus deeply injured you in one sense, has vouchsafed a royal act of bounty in another——"

"A *royal* act!" repeated Clarendon, catching at the word which seemed to afford an instantaneous clue to the solution of the mystery that was connected with his daughter's shame. "What am I to understand from your Grace's observation? Has Royalty so far honoured me as to debauch my daughter?" he demanded, with a laugh of almost maniac bitterness.

"Cease this useless excitement," said Fernanda; "and let us hear what atonement is offered. For that reparation of some kind is intended for the injury thus done you in the person of your daughter, is evident from the language of her Grace."

"Atonement — reparation!" murmured Mr. Clarendon, sinking down into his seat again. "Well—let us hear it! May it please your Grace to continue," he observed, half ironically, as he threw a wild glance upon the Duchess of Devonshire.

"I pray you to look upon me as a messenger of peace and conciliation," said Georgiana, stifling the resentment which rose up in her bosom at Mr. Clarendon's ungracious manner. "Your daughter Octavia had the misfortune to attract the notice of the Prince of Wales—and in a moment of love and passion, he triumphed over her virtue. But unfortunately the calamity does not end there. On Wednesday last Octavia sought an interview with her royal lover—and the excitement of the scene which ensued has temporarily impaired her reason."

"Holy God! what do I hear?" exclaimed the unhappy father, once more springing from his seat.

"My lord, I implore your lordship to be calm and composed!" said the Duchess of Devonshire, in a tone of suitable significancy.

"Ah! what do I hear?" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, turning towards her Grace with an abrupt start. "Was it to me that those sounding titles were addressed?"

"To whom else could I have spoken?" asked Georgiana, with a sweet smile. "I have revealed to you the injury—and I now proclaim the atonement. The Prince has inflicted the wound—and to the extent of his power he administers the anodyne. Permit me, then, to congratulate your lordship upon your elevation to the peerage;—and here is the patent of nobility which confers upon you the title of Baron Holderness."

The newly-created peer received the parchment from the hands of the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire: but he took it mechanically, staring upon her vacantly at the same time. It was evident that he could not believe his own ears, nor dared to trust his own eyes: he fancied that he was dreaming, and feared to utter even a word or make an abrupt movement lest he should awake and thereby dissipate the golden vision.

But Fernanda snatched away the parchment—tore it open—and was in a moment convinced that the Duchess of Devonshire had indeed spoken truly. The patent of nobility was drawn up in due form, and conferred upon Walter Octavius Clarendon, Esquire, the style and title of Baron Lord Holderness, to be had and held by himself and male heirs so long as his posterity should exist. A document on foolscap paper was annexed to the patent; and the hasty glance which Fernanda threw over the former, showed that the peerage was accompanied by the grant of a pension of two thousand pounds a-year, "for services rendered at divers times and in sundry manners to the Sovereigns of these realms by the ancestors of the said Walter Octavius Clarendon Baron Holderness, and likewise to enable him to maintain the dignity of his peerage."

A glow of mingled pride and joy suffused the countenance of Fernanda; and her husband, observing the animated expression of her features, no longer remained sceptical with regard to his good fortune. Taking the papers from her hand, he perused them with attention; and by degrees, as he read, the colour came to his sallow cheeks — the light of ineffable satisfaction and triumph gleamed in his eyes—his nostrils dilated—his chest expanded—and a thrill of ecstasy passed over his frame as he felt that the object of all his ambition was suddenly and most unexpectedly attained.

Forgotten was Octavia—unheeded now were her wrongs;—and, elate with boundless satisfaction, the newly-made peer expressed his gratitude to the Duchess of Devonshire for having been the bearer of the welcome tidings which now alone engrossed his attention. Turning towards Fernanda, he saluted her by the name of Lady Holderness and embraced her as fervently as if they had been courting for years and had married through love: then, flinging open the door and holding the papers in his hand, he hurried to the drawing-room to announce his good fortune to his younger daughter

and inform her that she was now the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon.

The young lady was seated upon the sofa in earnest conversation with Lord Florimel, when her father burst into the room.

"My dear child," he exclaimed, running up to her and catching her in his arms,—"congratulate me! I am now one of England's peers—no longer the obscure and humble Mr. Clarendon, dependent on the bounty of a haughty relative — but Lord Holderness with two thousand a-year. Congratulate me, I say, dear Pauline——"

But the young maiden withdrew herself abruptly, and even violently, from her father's arms;—and, surveying him for a few moments with a troubled countenance and a swelling bosom, she said, "Is it possible you can rejoice to-day after all that the Duchess of Devonshire must have revealed to you?"

Then back to the memory of Lord Holderness flashed the remembrance of his ruined and demented daughter: and, while a sudden pallor swept over his countenance, he staggered back a pace or two as if he were about to fall. But almost instantly recovering himself, he exclaimed, "Oh! our dear Octavia's secret shall be hushed up—and with kind treatment she will soon regain her mental equilibrium. We must not be hard upon the Prince—he is not to be judged by the same rules to which ordinary men are subject—and besides, has he not done all that lies in his power to make reparation and atonement?"

"Oh! my dear father," cried Pauline, in a rending tone of anguish, "can you find consolation in such wretched sophistry as this? Here on my knees—before you," she exclaimed, sinking down at his feet and joining her hands beseechingly, "do I call upon you to reject with scorn the bauble that has been offered as a recompense for the ruined honour of your elder daughter! Oh! I can understand it all—this peerage and this pension——"

"Silence, child!" ejaculated Lord Holderness: "it is for *me* to judge what I ought to accept or refuse —and not for *you* to dictate. Rise, I command you——and let me have no more of this puling sentimentalism!"

For a few moments Pauline remained like a kneeling statue, transfixed and paralysed with the shock occasioned by her father's language. Her upraised countenance, pale as marble, denoted amazement blended with terror and grief: and her arms remained outstretched to their full length, the hands being joined.

But suddenly her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed fire in a manner never seen before with respect to her: and, rising hastily from her suppliant posture, she said in a low thick voice, "Father, am I to understand that you accept this peerage and this pension as the recompense for our Octavia's dishonour?"

"Silence, child—I command you to be silent!" exclaimed Lord Holderness, his countenance growing livid with rage.

"Then this house is no longer a home for me," said Pauline, her features once more becoming ghastly pale—her whole form quivering with the strong spasms that shot through her heart—but her voice nevertheless indicating the firmness of a heroine and the self-devotion of a martyr. "Farewell, father—farewell! Not for worlds would I bask in the sunshine of that coronet which has been thus ignobly purchased; not to save myself from starvation would I eat a morsel of bread bought with the pension given as a reward for my poor dear sister's ruin! Farewell, father—I will pray for you morning and night, as heretofore: but your house can no longer be my home!"

She paused for a few moments, and cast a rapid look around. In the features of Florimel she read the rapture of that admiration and worship which her noble conduct excited in his soul: in the countenance of the Duchess she observed an expression of approval which her Grace could not subdue. But she saw that her father was dogged and morose; while his newly-wedded wife, Lady Holderness, stood by his side darting fierce and implacable glances upon the heroic maiden.

Then Pauline, advancing towards the Duchess of Devonshire, said in a tone of mingled confidence and entreaty, "Your Grace will afford me an asylum for a few hours until I can repair to the abode of my sister?"

"Ponder—reflect, Pauline," exclaimed Georgiana: "think of the step you are taking!"

"Then you refuse me an asylum?" said the young maiden, turning away: and as her eyes filled with tears, she was about to address herself to Lord Florimel, when the Duchess, who was naturally of unbounded generosity, caught her in her arms and embraced her tenderly.

"Yes—come with me, dear Pauline," exclaimed Georgiana: "and not only for a few hours—but for days, and weeks, and years may you command a home beneath my roof."

"A thousand thanks!" murmured Pauline, bursting into tears. "One moment—and I shall be with you!"

And she hurried away to her own chamber to put on her bonnet and scarf.

But as she was about to quit the drawing-room, Lord Holderness stretched out his hand to retain her—for his heart suddenly gave way at the thought of losing his youngest-born thus!

"Let the wilful girl have her own way!" said Fernanda sharply, as she caught hold of her husband's arm and drew it back.

And Lord Holderness made not another effort to induce Pauline to alter her determination.

Two minutes elapsed, during which not a word was spoken in the drawing-room.

At the expiration of that time a servant entered, and addressing himself to the Duchess, said, "Miss Clarendon is already seated in your Grace's carriage."

Florimel and Georgiana accordingly took their leave of Lord and Lady Holderness; and the newly-made peer, deprived of both his daughters, was left alone with his bride—that snake with the lovely skin!

CHAPTER CVI.

THE SANCTIMONIOUS CONCLAVE.

It was about three o'clock on the same day when the preceding incidents took place; and in the vestry-room of Salem Chapel five very religious-looking gentlemen were assembled round a table, on which there were several papers and tracts and likewise some smoking tumblers of rum-punch.

On one side of the board sate the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, looking more sanctimoniously demure and puritanically miserable than ever, in spite of the exhilarating influence of the potent beverage whereof he was partaking.

Facing this pious man, sate the equally estimable Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, who was making certain alterations in a manuscript which lay before him, and in which task he was guided by the suggestions of his reverend leader.

On Mr. Sneaksby's right hand was placed Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins—that chosen vessel who fulfilled the duties of Secretary to the New Light Tract Distribution Society. Honoured he no doubt was—but honorary he was not: for his secretaryship brought him in 300*l.* sterling a-year;—and in addition to this lucrative office, he held a few other pleasant and remunerative little posts — such as Chairman of the New Light Coal Club, at 50*l.* a-year—Treasurer to the New Light Blanket and Soup Donation Society, at 35*l.* a-year—Auditor to the Salem Religious Extension and General Proselytism Fund, at 60*l.* a-year—Corresponding Secretary to the Botany Bay New Light Branch Society for the Conversion of Felons, at 100*l.* a-year—Sole Manager of the New Light Interment and Funeral Procession Society, at 60*l.* a-year—and Assistant-Secretary to the New Light Society for the Introduction of Moral Picture Pocket-handkerchiefs into the Army and Navy, this last office producing the worthy gentleman a salary of 25*l.* a-year. It will therefore be seen that Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins had some very strong and substantial reasons indeed not only for sticking as close as wax to the New Lights, but also for praying morning, noon, and night, that their prosperity would endure for ever!

Next to Mr. Ichabod Paxwax sate Mr. Jonathan Crick, an outline of whose career was given in *Case the First* in the Secretary's Report at the grand meeting of the New Lights in the Strand. He was

a man with a countenance unnaturally elongated by continuous studied attempts to assume a sanctimonious aspect; and thus the corners of his mouth were so drawn down that he always seemed as if he were inwardly whimpering. In fact he appeared to have clothed himself in moral sackcloth and ashes, if we may be allowed the expression; and whenever he spoke, it was in such a whining, drawling, canting tone that a stranger would have fancied he was ready to burst out crying.

Between this meek and lowly vessel and the pluralist Mr. Tumpkins, sate the Rev. Unthank Snag, Mr. Sneaksby's pious assistant in the performance of the duties at Salem Chapel; and when we assure our readers that in looks, voice, dress, manner, and character, he was fully worthy to form an item in the influential Society of New Lights, we shall be pardoned if we enter into no detailed description of his many qualifications.

"Brother Paxwax," said the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, "open the door gently—peep forth—and let us know whether the godly are assembling in their tens, their twenties, and their hundreds."

"Verily will the meeting be crowded," answered the gentleman thus appealed to, after he had satisfied himself, by peeping forth in the way suggested, that the chapel was filling rapidly. "I hope, Brother Sneaksby, that your discourse will be as strong, as powerful, and as potent as—as——"

"As this rum-and-water," meekly observed Mr. Crick, perceiving that Brother Paxwax was at a loss for a proper simile.

"Thank you for the hint, my dearly-beloved brother in the good cause," said Ichabod. "Yea, verily—thy discourse must resemble this compound which men call punch," he continued, addressing himself to Mr. Sneaksby: "strength must preponderate even as the rum in our glasses, where the sugar likewise typifieth the sweetness of expression which will pervade thine exhortation; and the dash of the lemon will have its parallel in the slight sarcasm which thou wilt deal against all other sects save our own."

"Brother Paxwax," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of awful solemnity; "in likening the features of my intended discourse unto the ingredients of thy punch, thou hast omitted all mention of the hot water."

"I am justly rebuked," returned Ichabod, with an air of contrite humility. "But even as the boiling element maketh bubbles rise to the surface, so will thy discourse cause the shillings to ascend from the pockets of the godly."

At this moment there was a low, respectful, and timid knock at the vestry-door; and Mr. Paxwax hastened to respond to the summons. Opening the door a few inches, he beheld Mrs. Piggleberry in company with a pretty young woman of modest appearance and whose age might be about twenty.

"This dear creetur, good sir," said the widow, in a subdued and lachrymose tone, as she glanced towards the girl, "is my niece—my own brother's darter; and she's got no care or thought for her futur' state: so it struck me that I'd bring her with me this blessed Saturday afternoon to see if there wasn't no means of convertin' her into a state of grease."

"Yes, my good woman," answered Paxwax, peering through the narrow space to which he had opened the door; "we'll assuredly find means to bring your niece to a state of grace. But you must wait one minute—for my brethren here are at this moment under the inspiration of the spirit and cannot be disturbed."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax closed the door: whereupon he himself and his sanctimonious companions hastened to gulp down the remainder of their rum-punch—having disposed of which, they hastily concealed the glasses in a cupboard. Mr. Paxwax then returned to the door, and gave admittance to Mrs. Piggleberry and her niece—the former of whom was struck with awe and the latter with confusion on thus entering into the presence of this solemn conclave.

The five saints fixed their eyes upon the countenance of the blushing girl; and Mr. Unthank Snag's mouth watered as he observed her cherry lips—while Mr. Jonathan Crick looked as suddenly pleased as an antiquated goat.

Mrs. Piggleberry repeated her desire that her young relative should be brought "to a state of grease," as she denominated the procedure whatever it might be: and Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, after consulting his watch, observed, "There is verily time to commence the good work, Mrs. Piggleberry: retire thou back again into the chapel—and leave thy niece for a short time in the holy atmosphere of this council-room of the elect."

The worthy widow curtseyed and withdrew accordingly: and if every one of her senses had not been absorbed in the religious awe which swayed the ignorant, confiding old creature, she could not possibly have failed to sniff an egregious odour of rum in that "holy atmosphere."

The niece was so surprised at being thus suddenly left by her aunt that she was for some moments rooted to the spot: then, suddenly recovering herself, she would have hurried after Mrs. Piggleberry, had not the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby interposed his gaunt form between herself and the door, exclaiming, "Fear not, young woman: thou art with the godly!"

The girl's confusion now changed into a sense of the ludicrous and an inclination to burst out laughing in the face of the demure spiritual leader of the New Lights: but he, taking her hand, said, "Come with me, O wayward lamb whom the good sheep hath entrusted to my care; and I will become thy shepherd!"

Thus speaking, he led her into a small inner room where the surplices and black gowns were hanging, and where all the crockery was kept for the "tea-meetings" and "love-feasts" of the New Lights; and closing the door behind him, the reverend gentleman bade the young woman be seated. This invitation she accepted—entertaining no alarm at being in the company of so pious an individual, but being rather curious to hear what he could have to say to her.

"Fearing that thou would'st be confused, poor lamb, in the presence of my brethren," he commenced, once more taking her hand and keeping it in his own as he placed himself in a chair close by her side,—"I did bring thee into this privacy that we might converse in a blessed security and a holy peace. Tell me, young maiden, what is thy name?"

"Ann Jones, please sir," was the prompt reply: and as she spoke, her cherry lips revealed two rows of large but white and even teeth.

"And hast thou ever felt the spirit stirring within thee, Ann?" inquired Mr. Sneaksby, approaching his countenance towards her own.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," she said,

drawing back: for the pious gentleman fixed upon her a look which filled her with confusion.

"Verily and thou art a comely creature," he continued; "and thou shall be welcomed amongst us as one of the fairest of our flock. Suffer that I bestow upon thee the kiss of peace, sister."

And, throwing his arm round her neck, the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby embraced the young woman, who was too much astonished at the sudden and unexpected nature of the proceeding to offer the slightest resistance or even give utterance to an ejaculation.

"Now, beloved sister in the good cause," said the pious minister, "thou hast received the kiss of peace; and henceforth art thou one of the chosen vessels of the Lord. Thy life shall be savoury and pleasant; and if thou requirest shekels of silver or shekels of gold, come unto me and I will succour thee. Say, then, thou well-favoured Ann,—wilt thou be as a sister unto me?"

"If you behave kind and good, I've no objection," answered the young woman. "But keep your hands off!"

"Nay—verily, I meant no offence, Sister Ann," said Mr. Sneaksby. "With me you cannot err. I am now your spiritual pastor—and whatsoever I recommend, *that* must you perform—whatsoever I do, to *that* must you submit. Behold! thy shawl is not new and thy gown is of humble material. Get thee fitting raiment, dear sister, according to thy taste; and here is the gold wherewith to purchase the same."

As he uttered these words, the reverend gentleman put three or four guineas into the hand of the young woman, who could scarcely believe in her good fortune: for her parents were very poor—chiefly dependent on Mrs. Piggleberry—and unable to furnish their pretty daughter with an apparel calculated to set off her beauty to its greatest advantage.

"Put away the coin, my well beloved sister, in a secure place," said Mr. Sneaksby. "Dost thou wear a pocket? No. Well—and thou dost not carry a bag. Ah! a thought striketh me!—heaven never leaveth me at a loss for an idea to meet an emergency. Conceal the gold in thy bosom—it will be safe there. Yea, verily—in all brotherly feeling, I will show thee how to deposit it securely."

And, suiting the action to the word, the pious gentleman thrust his hand into the young woman's dress—a proceeding which she had not courage to resent after his generosity towards her. At the same moment the door was opened a little way—and the Rev. Unthank Snag slowly protruded his head, saying, "Brother Sneaksby, hast thou brought the stray lamb to a state of grace?"

"Verily, she is upon the road thither," returned the spiritual chief of the New Lights, hastily withdrawing his hand from the place into which it had intruded and where it was lingering somewhat longer than was necessary. "I will rejoin thee in a moment, Brother Snag."

"The godly are growing impatient in the chapel," observed this reverend assistant; "and in the gallery especially the blessed elect are stamping and shuffling with their feet. The beloved vessels are anxious for the meeting to commence."

Having given this intimation, Mr. Snag shut the door again and returned to his seat in the vestry-room.

"Now attend to my counsel, dear Sister Ann," said Mr. Sneaksby, the instant he was once more alone with the young woman. "Thou wilt find a true and valuable friend in me—one who, having much experience in all good and pleasant ways, will teach thee many things agreeable unto thyself. But thou shall place a seal upon thy lips: yea—even unto thine aunt and thy parents shalt thou be dumb respecting the gift of these guineas which I have given thee."

"Dear me, sir—I'm sorry for that!" exclaimed Ann, who had already pictured to herself the particular pattern of the dress which she should choose: "the money is totally useless to me unless I can spend it."

"Assuredly it is made to spend, beloved sister," answered Mr. Sneaksby: "but thou canst say that thou didst pick it up in the street—or that some lady took a fancy to thee and gave it—or that thou hast done needle-work in secret and earned the wage of thy labour. One of these excuses shalt thou make: for verily there is no harm in such trifling deception as that. Did not Abraham pass off his wife as his sister?—and yet he lost not the love of heaven on that account. Neither shalt thou, Sister Ann: and in following my counsel thou wilt act wisely."

"Oh! leave it to me to manage the matter, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry's niece. "I shan't mention your name at all—and I thank you kindly for your goodness towards me."

"Another kiss of peace," said Mr. Sneaksby: and the young woman offered not the slightest resistance and exhibited not the least resentment, as the pious gentleman refreshed himself with the sweets of her rosy lips.

She doubtless felt herself bound to permit his feelings to find free vent in this manner, after the handsome present he had made her. In fact, it is impossible to say to what greater length the caresses might have extended, had not the Rev. Mr. Unthank Snag again protruded his head slowly and discreetly into the room,—closing his eyes to the little peccadilloes of his pious superior,—but saying, "Brother Sneaksby, the vessels in the gallery are stamping their feet in the exuberance of their pious impatience!"

"Damn the vessels!" muttered the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, seized with a momentary fit of irritability: but instantly recovering his self-possession, he said in his habitual canting drone, "Dear Brother Snag, I come to hold forth to those blessed souls which are thus yearning for my spiritual counsel!"

Miss Ann Jones heard the oath that the reverend gentleman had let slip; and she was certainly amazed to a degree. But, feeling that it was no concern of her's and entertaining a great admiration of Mr. Sneaksby's generosity, she offered no comment on the little occurrence. The pious minister snatched another kiss from her lips—and then suffered her to depart, bidding her rejoin her aunt in the chapel.

As she passed through the vestry, she averted her head from the four saints who were seated there—a hasty glance having shown her that they were greedily devouring her with their eyes: and, on re-entering the chapel, she found her aunt anxiously awaiting her return.

"Well, my dear Ann," said the worthy Mrs. Piggleberry in a low whisper, when they were seated together in a pew, "has that pious vessel begun to bring you to a state of grease?"

"Yes—that he has, aunt," replied the young woman, in a joyous under-tone: "and I think he'll succeed altogether soon if he goes on in the same way he has begun."

"Heaven be thanked!" murmured Mrs. Piggleberry, clasping her hands and turning up the whites of her eyes as if she were going into a fit.

At this moment the vestry-door was thrown open; and the leaders of the New Lights came forth into Salem Chapel, which was densely crowded from floor to roof. The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby and the Rev. Mr. Snag, each in his black gown, walked first: the Secretary, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, was immediately behind them;—and Messrs. Paxwax and Crick brought up the rear. A subdued murmur of applause greeted their entrance—the nature of the occasion permitting such an expression of feeling on the part of the congregation, inasmuch as the meeting was rather for business purposes than of a religious complexion. Indeed, it was a "Special Assemblage of the Elect," convened "to take into holy and pious consideration the state of the funds connected with Salem Chapel and other matters deeply important to the progress of the good cause."

The Rev. Unthank Snag ascended the reading desk, while the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby slowly and demurely hoisted himself up into the pulpit: Messrs. Tumpkins, Paxwax, and Crick took their places in the Elders' Pew.

Mr. Paxwax gave out a hymn, with a request that it might be sung to the tune of the Old Hundreth: but the congregation manifested a complete independence and a remarkable freedom of opinion in this respect—chaunting the hymn to all possible tunes, real or imaginary. However, the discordant harmony, if we may be allowed so antithetical an expression, passed off to the satisfaction of all present; and at the conclusion of the melody, Mr. Snag invoked a blessing upon the proceedings.

The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby then rose in the pulpit and commenced his address.

He said that the chosen had been summoned for the purpose of considering the state of the funds specially belonging to the Chapel. Those funds were in a very unsatisfactory condition, and must be augmented. The voluntary contributions during the past year had only amounted to 2000*l.*: the rent absorbed 250*l.*—repairs 150*l.*—lighting, washing surplices, organist, sextoness, and petty cash, 300*l.* Then there were 300*l.* expended in vestry refreshments and in "love-feasts;" and thus 1000*l.* were accounted for at once. The other 1000*l.* had furnished a bare maintenance for himself (Mr. Sneaksby) and his revered coadjutor Mr. Snag. (*Marks of deep sympathy.*) Now it was absolutely necessary that he (Mr. Sneaksby) should have a suitable dwelling near the Chapel. Salem would not prosper without it: the welfare of the New Lights was at stake! Heaven knew that he could content himself with a garret to dwell in and a crust to eat: but the honour, credit, and respectability of the sect itself were compromised. A thousand pounds would build a couple of neat houses in the vicinage of the Chapel: one at 600*l.* for himself—the other at 400*l.* for his assistant, that chosen vessel Unthank Snag. (*Marks of deeper sympathy.*) Now this sum of 1000*l.* must be raised for the purposes named. All money was the Lord's; and some was now needed for the Lord's work. Let the congregation, then, put their hands into their pockets and pull out the Lord's money!

Having expatiated in this manner at great length Mr. Sneaksby sate down; and while Mr. Paxwax began to make a collection in a silver plate on one side of the chapel, Mr. Crick performed the same duty on the other.

Half-crowns, shillings, sixpences, and pence rattled quickly into the plates; and here and there some good old gentleman or pious elderly lady dropped in gold. The organ played a tune the whole time that this process was going on; and the sextoness sate with her back against the closed doors of the chapel, to prevent any one from sneaking out in order to avoid the contribution of his mite to the fund.

At length the collection was over; and the money was counted out in the Elders' Pew. Then Mr Gotobed Tumpkins wrote down the amount on a slip of paper, which was handed up to the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby.

"Christian friends—brothers and sisters," exclaimed this pious man, starting up in the pulpit and evidently labouring under great excitement: "I am ashamed of you! Yes—deeply though it afflicts me thus to speak, I am a man of truth—and the truth must be told. Therefore do I repeat that I am ashamed of you! The collection amounts to a paltry 200*l.* Blessed Salem, which is crowded in every point, holds two thousand persons; and two thousand persons have subscribed two hundred pounds! I am ashamed of you! This will not do. Sextoness, keep the door! The Lord's money is in your pockets, Christian brethren and sisters; and you must pull it out. The Lord wants his money—and it must be forthcoming. Brother Paxwax—Brother Crick—take round the plates again."

A dead silence followed this harangue: but it was soon broken by the rattling of more coin in the silver plates, as the deputed collectors passed from pew to pew. Superstition has its emulation as well as its influence;—and, instead of the whole congregation being indignant at the address which had just issued from the pulpit, each individual now felt his honour compromised and his faith tested. The feeling with each was therefore to outvie the rest in munificence; and those who had previously given copper now contributed silver—while they who had given gold in the first instance, now presented Bank-notes.

Meanwhile the organ played a lugubrious tune—the sextoness leant firmly against the closed folding-doors—and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby sate bolt upright, with a severe and even menacing countenance, in the pulpit; while Mr. Snag appeared to be putting up a silent prayer to heaven to open the hearts—or, in another word, the purses—of the congregation.

The second collection was completed—the money was counted—and the sum total was handed up to Mr. Sneaksby, as before, on a slip of paper.

Intense was the anxiety with which the assembled New Lights now contemplated their revered pastor. The organ had ceased—and a pin might have been heard to drop in the chapel.

"Christian friends—brothers and sisters," said the pious gentleman, rising with sanctimonious solemnity and without excitement; "I am cheered—I am refreshed in spirit—I am inspired to gladness, by this change in the aspect of affairs. I am no longer ashamed of you. To all do I waft the kiss of peace! The subscriptions now amount to 450*l.* The Lord's money has to some extent come out of your pockets I ask no more on the present occasion. With this

instalment the buildings may be commenced forthwith; and when the funds are exhausted, you will be convoked to give up a further portion of the Lord's money. Yea—verily do I repeat that I am no longer ashamed of you: on the contrary, my heart is exceeding glad—and my soul is proud of the conduct you have just displayed. Dear Christian brethren—beloved Christian sisters—let the kiss of peace pass amongst ye!"

The word being thus given, the congregation hastened to testify their devotion to their spiritual leader by obeying his commands with the utmost alacrity. For heaven knows the kiss of peace did indeed pass amongst the assembled New Lights; and such a hugging, smacking of lips, and murmuring of pious joy arose throughout the chapel that the scene must have hugely delighted the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, as he surveyed it from the dignified height of the rostrum. Old men embraced young women—young men bestowed their caresses on ancient dames—and we need hardly say that in those cases where both parties were young, the kissing was in every respect as enthusiastic as the best friends of the New Lights could have possibly wished it to be. A few bonnets were crushed — some wigs were thrust away — and the ringlets of one or two false fronts were pushed over the eyes of the wearers: but these trifling mishaps occasioned not the slightest murmur—so acceptable was the kiss of peace wherever it was received!

Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, in his capacity of Senior Elder of Salem, now read a Report, which the conclave had cooked up in the vestry-room previously to the meeting, and which set forth the precise state of the funds as already glanced at by Mr. Sneaksby. The document proceeded to recommend an unwearied agitation in the cause of the New Light doctrines, and insisted on the necessity of obtaining ample pecuniary means for this blessed religious militancy. The Report accordingly suggested that each member of the Congregation of Salem should have a Subscription Card, ruled in columns for £. s. d., so that the names of donors and the amounts of donations might be readily entered.

The Rev. Mr. Unthank Snag now gave out the pleasing intelligence that a love-feast would be holden in the chapel on that day three weeks, at six o'clock in the evening, on which occasion it was hoped that the New Lights would muster in great strength. This announcement was received with a low hum of applause: the doxology was then sung —and, the old sextoness having abandoned her post at the door, the congregation were suffered to depart.

CHAPTER CVII.

THE ROYAL GEORGE.

Ten days had elapsed since the Magsman and Big Beggarman embarked on board the brig in the Mersey; and during that interval the ship had pursued its way towards the western hemisphere.

At first a favourable wind and tolerably fine weather had attended upon the course of the *Royal George;* and thus for a week considerable progress had been made in the voyage. But a change then took place: the steady breeze broke into fitful gusts of violent fury—the heavens grew black and menacing—the ocean rolled in dark and sombre waves—and every sign familiar to the seaman's experience denoted the coming storm.

Over the surface of the troubled main swept the screaming bird;—and on the tenth evening the sun went down a deep blood-red colour, like a lamp of evil omen extinguishing beneath the mighty arch of heaven which now overhung the boundless ocean like a tremendous sheet of lead.

In the captain's cabin the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were seated at the table, upon which stood the drinking materials that were prevented from falling off by a rim running above the surface all around the board: for the vessel was now tossing up and down on the undulating bosom of the Atlantic.

A lamp was suspended to the ceiling of the cabin: but through the stern windows the white crests of the billows could be discerned like moving masses of snow gleaming in the obscurity—and from time to time the spray dashed against the thick glass.

The rapid trampling of the sailors upon deck—the responses which they gave to the commands which the captain thundered forth—the rattling of the cordage—the shaking of masts and spars—the frequent fluttering of the sails—the din of the rudder beating occasionally against the stern of the vessel—the tremendous oscillation of the tiller—the straining of the timbers from one end of the vessel to the other—the changing voices in which the gale spoke—now dull, low, and mournful as if with subdued moanings—then loud, bursting, gushing, roaring, raging, as it swept over the Atlantic,—these were the sounds which fell upon the ears of the two men as they sate smoking, drinking, and conversing alone together in the cabin.

And although their discourse was of a private and particular nature, no necessity was there to speak in whispers: for so great was the din without—in the ship, upon the ocean, and in the air—that there were intervals when the two men could not hear themselves speak;—and thus, even if a listener had been stationed on the other side of the door, with his ear to the panels, he could not have overheard a syllable that was uttered in that cabin.

It was now about eight o'clock on this memorable evening—and the anger of the storm was rapidly increasing to a perfect fury.

But, comparatively unmoved by the elemental war, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were deliberately digesting projects well suited to the appalling nature of the night that was heralded by a blood-red sunset and an evening of tempestuous heavens.

"Well, then—you're decided on doing it without any unnecessary delay?" said the Big Beggarman, as he refilled his pipe and pressed down the tobacco with his thumb.

"This very night, Stephen," responded the Magsman. "There's no use in waiting any longer—and since our plans are pretty well decided on——"

Here the gale drowned the remainder of his sentence.

"Now let us look the whole thing calmly and coolly in the face once more," said the Big Beggarman, after a long pause: "so that we may calculate all the chances that's for us and all that's against us."

"Good!" exclaimed Joe Warren: "there's no-

thing like holding a proper council of war. In the first place, then, we must reflect that you and me are only two on one side against the captain and nine men on the other."

"That's two against ten," observed the Big Beggarman, gloomily.

"And ten strong, sturdy fellers that don't know what fear is," added Joe Warren. "But this is only the dark side of the picture. The light side is more flattering than t'other is discouraging. In the first place we must make away with the captain."

"That's easy enow," observed the Beggarman. "He has quite lost all his mistrust of us—and by waiting so patiently before we made up our minds to do anything or take any step, we've quite lulled asleep any suspicion that he might have entertained."

"You're right there, Stephen," responded the Magsman. "That he did look upon us in a very queer fashion at the beginning, is very certain: or else he wouldn't have made us give up our pistols the first night we were on board the ship. But by degrees his fears wore off: and then he let us go upon deck the second day and chat with the sailors. Well, our first move, as we were saying, is to make away with him: and then we must serve the chief mate in the same manner. That's not impossible to be done, as I explained to you yesterday."

"But then we shall have eight sturdy mariners to deal with," said the Beggarman.

"They'll be paralysed when we tell them what we've done and what we mean to do," rejoined Warren, in a tone of desperate ferocity. "After all," he continued, at the expiration of a few minutes, during which a tremendous gust swept over the ocean and the vessel went careering down into the abyss like a maddened race-horse—then up the mighty steep of waters again at a far slower rate,—"after all, we ain't the men to stand upon trifles, Stephen—and if it comes to the scratch, we must fight a bloody battle, even though the odds will be eight to two when the captain and first mate are put out of the way."

"Aye—it won't come to such a desperate combat, when we think calmly of the business," said the Big Beggarman. "The men will knock under as soon as they see that their chief officers are gone and that we're resolute. Besides, the hope of plunder and the excitement of the new kind of life which we shall propose to them——"

"That's the very point which I rely upon!" ejaculated the Magsman. "But let us still look at the worst. With arms in our hands, friend Stephen, there ain't two more formidable fellers on the face of this earth than we are——"

"Well, I rather think not," interrupted the Beggarman, complaisantly. "And as to getting the weapons to use in case of necessity, there won't be much difficulty on that score—for the captain always carries pistols secreted about him. *That* we know for a certainty."

"And there's always half-a-dozen cutlasses on deck, round the foot of the main-mast," added the Magsman: "for though the captain's suspicions have been lulled asleep, as you observed just now, he hasn't omitted the necessary precautions in case we should suddenly show our teeth. But *his* precautions will be *our* safeguard: that is to say, we shall know where to lay our hands upon weapons at the proper moment. After all said and done, I shan't be sorry in the long run that the nobleman, whoever he was, played us this infernal trick. The first night we came on board, when I opened the letter which I expected was to contain Bank-notes for the fifteen hundred due to me, I was cursedly savage to find that it was a bill payable in New York only."

"And I wasn't best pleased when I opened *my* letter at the same time and found the same thing," observed the Beggarman. "It was a deuced good plant to compel us to go out to America and reconcile us to our fate in that respect. But we've hit upon a plan that'll upset all the nobleman's fine schemes," added the ruffian, with a horrible chuckle.

"I should think so indeed," exclaimed the Magsman. "We'll not only get our fifteen hundred pounds each in New York—but we'll also get the ship and everything in her. The cargo must be worth some thousands. And therefore, as I was saying just now, I'm not so particularly sorry after all that his unknown lordship has tried this plant upon us. Had we received our money in good Bank-notes upon coming on board, and if no restraint had been put upon us, we should have quietly left the ship again and stepped back on British ground, contented with the cash we'd realized. But now the treachery practised towards us, has instigated *us* to treachery likewise; and there's more than one person that'll be made to rue the——"

Here the Magsman's voice was drowned in the roar of the tempest which increased a thousand fold all the terrible noises that we have enumerated above.

But soon after the rage of that tremendous gust had spent itself, there was a long interval of comparative lull: and, the door of the cabin suddenly opening, the captain of the vessel made his appearance.

His rough garments were shining with the spray which had dashed over him: the water dropped from the wide brim of the low glazed hat which he had substituted for his cap with the gold-lace band; —and his dripping hair hung lanky and straight over his ears. His countenance was more rubicund than ever; and his aspect altogether was that of the weather-beaten, sturdy tar to whom storms were familiar and tempests a source of not unpleasurable excitement.

"Well, my hearties," he exclaimed, in a voice which was hoarse and thick from the effects of bawling out his orders upon the deck amidst the din of the elements,—"you manage to make yourselves pretty comfortable—eh? That's all right—and I thought I'd just step down to see how you was both getting on. It blows great guns, by jingo!"

"Won't it be a nasty night, captain?" demanded the Magsman.

"Rough enow," was the laconic response, as the captain shook himself like a dog just emerged from the water. "But there's nothin' to fear, my hearties," he added at the expiration of a few moments: "a good ship and plenty of sea-room—that's all one wants to make everything safe and trim."

"You'll take a dram, captain—eh?" said the Big Beggarman.

"Just to keep the cold out," observed Joe Warren. "Come—sit down there, and I'll mix a stinger for you."

"Well, I don't mind staying a minute or two

with you," returned the skipper, taking the seat which the Magsman officiously vacated for his accommodation: then, pulling off his hat and unbuttoning his heavy pea-jacket, he said, "This is the eleventh voyage I've made in this here boat across the Atlantic without any mishap—and so I'll drink success to the present wentur'."

"And we'll jine in," observed the Big Beggarman, catching the rapid glance of terrible significancy which the Magsman at the same moment darted upon him.

"Well, here's success, then," said the captain, raising to his lips the tumbler which Joe Warren had filled with grog for his behoof.

"I shall driuk that toast in a bumper," exclaimed the Beggarman, helping himself to a copious supply of the rum.

"And so will I," said the Magsman, receiving the bottle from his friend's hand.

But, quick as thought,—and as if suddenly obeying a galvanic impulse,—Joe Warren grasped the bottle by the neck and raised it above his head as if it were a short club. The captain perceived the movement in an instant—saw the intended treachery—and sprang to his feet,—thus encountering as it were half-way the tremendous blow which the ruffian dealt him with the bottle. Crash it descended upon the seaman's head—and into a thousand pieces it flew. A cry burst from the victim's lips, as he staggered back, the blood pouring down his face and blinding him with its sanguine flood: and, although half stunned, he mechanically thrust one hand into the inner pocket of his pea-jacket to clutch a pistol.

But, like a tiger springing upon its prey from the thicket of an Indian jungle—or as the boa-constrictor flings itself from a bough on the traveller passing beneath—did the Magsman rush upon the doomed mariner. Down they fell together, a savage growl escaping from Joe Warren's breast; and at the same moment the Big Beggarman, falling on his knees, fixed his iron grasp upon the captain's throat.

Like two demons did the murderers appear as they did their awful work,—one keeping the victim down, despite of his desperate struggles and agonised writhings—the other throttling him in his savage gripe,—the former gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth with the ferocious excitement of the deed—the latter with compressed lips and corrugated brows indicating all the tremendous power of the muscular energy which his entire frame furnished to accomplish the task of strangulation.

And in the meantime the roar of the tempest had recommenced; and the terrors of the storm were added to the horrors of that foul iniquity.

'Twas done: and the captain lay lifeless on the cabin-floor—his countenance livid and blue—his eyes starting from their bloody sockets.

Springing to their feet when they were assured that the death-struggle was ended, the two murderers took possession of their victim's pistols. Then they opened one of the stern-windows; and, raising the corpse between them, they threw it forth into the ocean which was now lashing itself up into foaming fury. The waters sucked in the dead body—and at the same instant a tremendous wave beat against the stern of the vessel. To draw down the wooden lids protecting the ports in which the windows were set, was now the work of a few moments with the Magsman and the Big Beggarman; and having done this, their eyes met with looks of savage triumph, as they saw in the assassination of the captain the accomplishment of the first and most important step in their grand nefarious scheme.

"Now, Stephen," said the Magsman, as he examined the priming of the pistols and assured himself that it was quite dry—the great rough coat of the captain having effectually defended the weapons from the spray which had beaten over their owner when he was alive and performing his duty upon the deck,—"now, Stephen, you must go up above and play your part as already agreed on."

"I understand, old feller," responded the Big Beggarman, putting on his hat as firmly as possible so as to encounter the fury of the gale: then, having tossed off a dram of raw spirit, he quitted the cabin, closing the door behind him.

On ascending to the deck, the atmosphere was at first so dark that the Big Beggarman could distinguish nothing: all seemed black as if the air were a solid mass of pitch. But in a few moments his eyes began to grow accustomed to that dense obscurity; and the masts, spars, and cordage gradually stood out in lines of jet against the inky sky. The forms of the seamen appeared like black objects of uncouth shape; and the bulwarks of the vessel stretched forward on either side until they seemed lost in the darkness at the farther extremity.

The wind was howling, sweeping, and roaring in all the variations of its voice of terror: the spray beat over the deck—and the motion of the ship was so great that the Big Beggarman would have speedily lost his balance had he not in the first instance clung to a rope, and then made a rush as it were to the main-mast.

Unobserved by the sailors, who were bustling about performing the orders issued from the lips of the first mate, the Big Beggarman hastily secured under his coat all the cutlasses which were kept in a rack upon the after-deck. He then availed himself of a temporary lull in the hurricane to make his way up to the spot where the chief mate was standing; and in a tone of apparent frankness and haste, he said, "The captain has been taken suddenly ill down in the cabin, sir, and wants to speak to you directly."

"The deuce! what's the matter with him?" demanded the chief mate.

"He was seized with a shivering all over and fell down in a sort of fit," was the Big Beggarman's ready response. "But he's rallied a little by having rum poured down his throat—and now he wants to speak to you."

The mate, totally unsuspicious of treachery, instantly summoned Mr. Watkins, a subordinate officer, whom he ordered to take charge of the ship for a few minutes; and he then hastened down the companion-ladder, the Big Beggarman following close behind him. Opening the door, he entered the cabin: but scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when he was knocked down by a huge bludgeon which the Magsman had obtained by breaking off the leg of a stool. The Big Beggarman rushed in—shut the door behind him—and, drawing a cutlass, made a desperate sweep with the trenchant blade at the unfortunate officer as he was starting up from the floor. A yell of agony rang from the victim's lips,—a yell which reached not the ears of those on deck, or, if it did, was mistaken for one of the thousand tones in which the voice of the tempest speaks

upon the ocean. But even before that appalling sound had ceased to vibrate on the ears of the murderers in the cabin, their terrible work was accomplished—the deed was done—and the mate became the second victim of the tremendous tragedy of this night of horrors!

From one of the stern-windows the gory corse was thrust into the ocean; and once more did the assassins exchange looks of ferocious satisfaction and diabolical triumph.

But now came the most hazardous portion of their enterprise,—a crisis which must decide the attitude that the crew would take towards them! Still the miscreants quailed not in the presence of the danger which they were incurring: but enhancing their natural courage by means of the artificial stimulant supplied by the burning alcohol which they poured copiously down their throats, they prepared for the worst with an undaunted energy worthy of a better cause.

Each arming himself with a drawn cutlass and a loaded pistol,—and having secreted the other swords in the bedding of one of their cots, so that those weapons should not at least become immediately available to the sailors,—the Magsman and the Big Beggarman ascended to the deck.

Watkins, the second mate, who had been left in charge of the ship, was standing close by the man at the wheel; and the other sailors were distributed about in different parts of the vessel according to the nature of the duties which they were at the moment called upon to perform.

The instant Joe Warren and the Beggarman put their feet upon the deck, they hastily accosted the second mate and the steersman; and presenting their pistols, exclaimed, "Dare to move from your posts and we will blow your brains out! Silence—speak not a word—and your lives shall be spared!"

The suddenness of a proceeding so utterly unexpected—the determined manner in which the two ruffians spoke—and the cold contact of the muzzles of the pistols against the foreheads of Watkins and the steersman, so completely astounded these individuals that the injunction of silence was in reality perfectly unnecessary: terror and amazement had already sealed their lips!

"One word is as good as twenty," said Joe Warren, now acting as spokesman. "The truth is, then, that we have made away with the captain and the first mate—and we mean to take possession of the ship or die in the attempt. If you fall into our views, well and good: we'll sell the cargo first—share the spoil—and then hoist the black flag and turn pirates. But if you resist, we'll continue the bloody work that's already begun, by murdering you both. Now what say you?"

"Who's to command the ship?" inquired Watkins, who had by this time recovered his presence of mind and who now spoke with promptitude and decision.

"You shall be the captain," answered the Magsman,—"on particular conditions; and Bradley the steersman shall be first mate. Now, then—speak—what say you?"

"I agree," returned Watkins, unhesitatingly.

"And so do I," said the helmsman, whose name was Bradley.

"You both swear most solemnly that you fall into our views?" demanded the Magsman.

"We swear," was the resolute and firm response.

"All right!" exclaimed the Magsman, withdrawing his pistol from its menacing vicinage to the head of Watkins—while the Big Beggarman simultaneously released Bradley from the like state of jeopardy.

The scene which we have just related scarcely occupied two minutes. The action was prompt—the discourse was rapid, brief, and to the point;—and the understanding was therefore speedily come to and settled. None of the other sailors had overheard the conversation or noticed that anything unusual was going forward: for, in the first place, they were too far off to be within ear-shot of the words spoken on the after-part of the deck, especially in the midst of a roaring sea and a gushing hurricane—and, secondly, the night was much too dark to permit them to catch even a glimpse of the naked cutlasses or the pistols which the two murderers wielded. There were thus six more men in the ship to win over by fair means or coerce by foul; and Joe Warren did not doubt a successful issue to the adventure in either case.

"Now summon three of the men, captain," he said to Watkins, "and tell them what has occurred."

This order was instantly obeyed; and the three sailors whom Watkins called aft, heard with mingled feelings of terror and surprise that a mutiny had taken place on board—that their legitimate commander and first mate had been murdered—and that their adhesion was required to the new condition of things, under peril of their own lives. Two of them, influenced by the promises made and the hopes held out, instantaneously signified their assent; while fear induced the third to adopt a similar course. They were then ordered to stand aside, while the remaining three sailors were summoned in their turn to receive the startling communication of all that had occurred on board within the previous quarter of an hour; and the result was completely satisfactory to the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

Copious allowances of spirits were now dealt round; and the tragic mutiny was succeeded by boisterous hilarity on board of the *Royal George*.

But still the storm continued: the wind swept in tremendous gusts over the Atlantic, whose bosom was upheaved into waves that ran mountains high;—and presently the lightning flashed forth in vivid brilliancy, and the thunder rolled with a crashing din as if a thousand chariots were tearing along a brazen bridge.

CHAPTER CVIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

We now return to the Countess of Desborough—that charming, beautiful, and strong-minded woman, whose passions were however more potent than her reason, and whose temperament had plunged her, after many, many successful struggles against temptation, into the vortex of love's voluptuous enjoyments.

For the attachment which she cherished towards Ramsey amounted to a fervent enthusiasm that would have conducted her all-smiling to the stake, had it been necessary to die for him,—a love not only arising from a sense of his manly beauty and

from the happiness enjoyed in the burning moments of sensual delight, but also from admiration of those graces of manner and intellect which so pre-eminently characterised the resuscitated convict!

Three weeks had elapsed since accident first threw in her way the man whom she knew only as Gustavus Wakefield: and a fortnight had now passed since she surrendered herself to his arms. During this period her love had become enhanced into a frenzy; and her husband must have been perfectly blind if he had not perceived the worship with which his beauteous Eleanor regarded their guest. But she had never once paused to reflect whether her conduct were not calculated to excite her husband's suspicions: yielding to the torrent of pleasure and ecstacy that bore her soul along and bathed her senses in a tide of unutterable bliss, she had no thought for anything save this delirious dream of delight—no consideration for any one save the man who had thus suddenly become the emperor of her heart.

It will be remembered that Fernanda Aymer returned to her uncle's mansion immediately after the failure of the midnight attempt which she made to poison Arthur Eaton, on that occasion when William Dudley introduced her to his young master's apartment: but having remained for a few days beneath the roof of her noble relatives, Fernanda departed suddenly, with the avowed intention of visiting the Earl's seat in Derbyshire. It was on the morning of the very day when his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales dined with Lord and Lady Desborough, that Fernanda had thus quitted the mansion in Berkeley Square: and from that time her relatives had heard little concerning her, until the astounding intelligence was conveyed to them, by means of a hurried note which she had written, that she had become the wife of Mr. Clarendon—or rather Lord Holderness.

The Earl of Desborough, when he began to reflect calmly upon the matter, was not sorry that his way-

ward, volatile, and perverse-tempered niece had thus settled herself in life and at all events formed an honourable connexion: and he could not help thinking that Arthur Eaton had experienced a somewhat fortunate escape in being refused by a young lady of so strange, wild, and self-willed a disposition. As for the Countess of Desborough—she was too much absorbed in her passion for Ramsey to devote many minutes' thought to Fernanda: and moreover on the Saturday evening when the tidings of the young lady's marriage reached Berkeley Square, Eleanor was completely wrapt up in the enjoyment of her lover's society after an absence of three days on his part.

For our readers will remember that on the previous Thursday night Ramsey had appeared to Mr. and Mrs. Page in the library at Stamford Manor; and that visit to the neighbourhood of Aylesbury had certain objects which will transpire hereafter.

On the Saturday evening he came back to Berkeley Square—his departure and his return both taking place at dusk, when his countenance might be effectually concealed by the shade of his hat and the collar of his cloak. But need we say that in the meantime his absence had appeared an age to the enamoured Eleanor, and the three days had seemed as many centuries? All the next day she remained at home on purpose to enjoy his society—the excuses which he made for not going out, proving quite satisfactory to herself, and eliciting no remark on the side of her husband. Indeed, the Earl of Desborough had sought the solitude of his library more than ever since the arrival of Ramsey at the mansion: and had Eleanor found leisure to observe her husband's manner or notice his personal appearance with any degree of attention, she would have perceived that beneath an air of extreme kindness towards herself and of affability towards her lover, there was a profound melancholy devouring the nobleman's very vitals,—and that his cheeks were growing pale, his form emaciated, and his brow furrowed, with a rapidity that was but too awfully perceptible to all about him save his own adulterous wife and her unprincipled paramour.

Having recorded these few necessary observations, we now resume the thread of our narrative.

It was on the Monday following the Saturday on which Ramsey had returned to his comfortable quarters in Berkeley Square; and at about three o'clock in the afternoon we find him seated in the drawing-room with the lovely and loving Countess of Desborough.

Her ladyship had instructed the domestics that she was not "at home" to any visitors; and she was accordingly giving herself up to all the blandishments of a *tête-a-tête* with him whom she called her "dear Gustavus." Her splendid eyes looked burning fondness and enthusiastic passion upon him; while his reflected the more sensual feeling and fixed their gaze on her countenance with a fervour which she mistook for unalloyed affection as profound and intense as her own.

Never had she seemed more beautiful, nor he more handsome; and, so far as personal appearance went, there was a remarkable fitness in this couple for each other. Their dark hair—olive complexions—large black eyes—brilliant teeth—and classical outline of feature, made them look like brother and sister: while the ardour of their temperament and the strength of the fires that burned within their breasts, rendered them suitable partners in the dalliance of love.

"Tell me, my Gustavus—do you indeed entertain for me all the fondness which breathes in your words and gives a glory to your looks?" asked Eleanor, in a tone that was low and tremulous with the soft feelings that prompted the question.

"Can you doubt my love?—do you suspect the truth of my vows?" said Ramsey, modulating his own voice to the tender sensuousness of the scene: and taking the hand of the Countess, he fastened his lips upon the warm, plump flesh which thrilled with the ecstatic fervour that animated her entire being. "Should not I rather question you, my beloved Eleanor," he continued, "respecting the permanence of that attachment which you now feel towards the friendless stranger?"

"Ah! how can you speak in this mournful, hopeless manner of yourself, Gustavus?" exclaimed the Countess, darting upon him a look of mingled devotedness and reproach. "Wherefore use the word *friendless?* Am not I your friend?—would I not lay down my life to serve you? Oh! my beloved Gustavus, you had forgotten that there was such a being as myself in the world when you made that observation."

"Pardon me, dearest—dearest Eleanor," said the resuscitated criminal, folding that charming and elegant woman in his embrace and imprinting a thousand kisses upon her glowing, burning, blushing cheeks. "I had not forgotten you," he continued in the murmuring tone which indicates the strength of sensual passion: "no—never, never can I forget you, my beloved—never can I cease to remember that you are the only being whom I ever truly adored and by whom I was ever loved so tenderly in return. All my hopes of happiness are centred in thee, Eleanor: were I doomed to separate from thee, my well-beloved, I should end my days in the blood of a distracted suicide."

"Oh! speak not in such dreadful terms as these!" whispered the Countess, her own voice being subdued and hushed by the power of her passion: and, half-reclining in his arms, she gazed long and ardently upon the handsome countenance of her lover, while her bosom heaved voluptuously against the hand which unreprovedly pressed it. "Wherefore should you entertain an idea of even the possibility of our separation? Are you not happy beneath this roof?—do you pant for change, Gustavus?"

"No—no: ten thousand times no, my angel!" he responded, accompanying his words with caresses that made the blood circulate like lightning in the veins of the impassioned woman. "But ask yourself, dearest Eleanor, whether this state of bliss can endure for ever? Does it not appear like a dream which must inevitably have a waking? Your husband——"

"Oh! let us not talk of him!" exclaimed the Countess, with a movement of impatience. "Ever since I possessed your love, Gustavus, I have experienced feelings amounting almost to a loathing and a bitter aversion in respect to him."

"I can well understand those emotions, sweet Eleanor," answered the wily criminal: "but you must pardon me if I persist in speaking of the Earl for a few moments. Oh! cannot you guess what I mean?—can you not divine that I allude to the possibility of our love being discovered? Each day—each hour we become less guarded: already

has that possibility amounted to a probability—and in another week or ten days it will be an inevitable certainty. Will not the time come, then, my ever dear Eleanor, when we must look all this in the face and determine how to meet the emergency?—and will it not be better to find ourselves prepared how to act, instead of being left to the irresolution which invariably accompanies the excitement and the confusion of a sudden discovery? Nay, more—would it not be even preferable to anticipate the catastrophe?"

"To what do you allude?—what do you mean?" demanded the Countess, now for the first time awakening somewhat from her delicious dreams of bliss, and starting back almost in affright from the precipice on which she found herself standing. "You have some plan in your mind—some project, Gustavus——"

"Hear me calmly, my love," interrupted Ramsey, again lavishing upon the charming patrician lady the most tender and ardent caresses—so that the cheek which rested against his own glowed with animation, and the eyes which looked up into his were filled with a lustrous languor, melting yet full of fire. "I beseech and implore you to contemplate, dear Eleanor, the results of a discovery," he continued. "My ignominious expulsion from the house would be the first step taken by your enraged husband—and who knows but that he might sacrifice you to his fury? Then—Oh! then, what would become of me? I should destroy myself—and our love would terminate as fatally as our deaths would be premature!"

"Alas! alas! there is indeed much truth in this prophetic picture which you have drawn, Gustavus," exclaimed Eleanor, snatching herself from his embrace and gazing upon him in mingled terror and entreaty. "Tell me—Oh! tell me, I conjure you, what course you would have us adopt—what plan you would recommend."

"Eleanor," said Ramsey, in a tone that was solemn and even awe-inspiring,—"you have given me every proof of an ardent love—and you have declared that you would die to serve me. But you shall live to bless me: we will live for each other! Oh! can you not comprehend what I would suggest?—do you not understand the nature of the sacrifice which you must make for this love of our's?"

"Speak—speak, Gustavus!" exclaimed the Countess, vehemently. "What would you have me do?"

"Fly with me!" was the resolute and yet solemn answer.

"Oh! my God—must it come to *that?*" cried the lady, bursting into tears and wringing her hands. "Must this love of our's bring disgrace upon me——"

"If you hesitate, Eleanor," interrupted Ramsey, "it is that you love me less than you love the brilliant position which you occupy in the world of fashion. In this case I will leave you—the sooner the better—ere my heart breaks——"

"Leave me! O cruel Gustavus—why give utterance to such menaces?" exclaimed Eleanor, painfully excited. "No—you shall not leave me—we will not separate! I am happy with you—I shall be wretched without you. What to me is the gay and splendid sphere of rank and fashion? Have I not abandoned it for these two weeks past in order to be constantly in your society? Oh! you know not yet how profound is woman's love—you have not learnt to appreciate the immensity of her affection! But I will teach you the lesson, Gustavus—and you shall receive from me a far greater proof of my tenderness than any I have yet been able to afford you. For I will surrender my good name in order that I may keep your love—I will fling fame and reputation to the winds, sooner than be separated from thee! Yes—all that woman values most dearly will I resign for your sake,—home, friends, relations, and the world's adulation—and what is more still, the world's respect! Now will you believe that I love you?"

And as she gave utterance to these last words, the patrician lady started from her seat—and drawing herself up to the full of her queen-like stature and her noble height, she appeared radiant with triumph and overpoweringly beautiful in the Olympian effulgence which the glowing animation of her cheeks and the lustre of her eyes shed around her.

Oh! the broken ties of sacred matrimony—a ruined reputation—a cast-away future,—all, all were now dared and defied by this nobly-born woman who was courageous enough to immolate everything dear upon the altar of her still dearer love!

"Eleanor, I thank you—my God! I thank you, from the depths of my soul!" exclaimed Ramsey, sinking at her feet and covering her hand with kisses.

"Rise, my well-beloved!" she said, little dreaming how much of theatrical effect there was in *his* proceeding, but judging him by her own fervid sincerity and profound enthusiasm. "What I have pledged myself to do, I will perform without a murmur—and the sooner, the better, now that my resolution is taken. Pardon me, then," she continued in a more subdued tone and with a sudden embarrassment of manner, as she pressed her lover's hand affectionately,—"pardon me if I now turn the conversation for a moment upon things of worldly importance only. But it is necessary that I should inform you, my beloved Gustavus, that I am not independent of my husband in a pecuniary sense. A few hundreds of pounds—my jewels—these are all the wealth that I can take away with me; and I know that for the present your circumstances are not as prosperous as I could wish them to be."

"But I am young—and I am not wanting in certain intellectual qualifications," answered Ramsey. "I possess a perfect knowledge of the French language—and in the United States of America I may hope, as a tutor or as a translator, to earn a livelihood. And then—in addition to all this, I think I may safely say that by means of certain deeds in my possession I may obtain a considerable sum of money——"

"Oh! it grieves me to think that we are compelled to speak of the dross of this world in the same breath with love which is the gold of the heart's feelings!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Enough, then, upon that subject. You know *my* position, Gustavus—you are aware that it is little more than my profound affection which I can bestow upon thee. Oh! if my fortune were as immense as my love for thee, the wealth of the Indies would be pauperism in comparison therewith!"

"'Tis thy love only which I seek, Eleanor," responded the treacherous criminal, as he strained that confiding and noble-hearted woman to his tainted breast.

They now resumed their seats upon the sofa—

composed their countenances and their feelings as well as they were able,—and oh! how different were those feelings that animated them!—and they then began to settle their plans for an early flight from the British capital and from the English shores.

But in the midst of this conversation the Earl of Desborough entered the room; and, actually torturing his inward being with the efforts that he made to assume a calm and even smiling exterior, the deeply-to-be-pitied nobleman said, "That young artist, Eleanor, in whom, as you are aware, I have taken some interest, has brought a portrait which he wishes to exhibit to us. He assures me it is one of rather a startling character, though merely a portrait: but more he will not tell me until he removes the cloth which covers it. Will you not gratify his very pardonable vanity by consenting to inspect this work of art? And perhaps Mr. Wakefield will likewise honour him?" added the Earl, turning towards Ramsey.

"I should have much pleasure, my lord," replied this individual, who invariably found some handy excuse for avoiding a meeting with any strangers who visited the mansion,—"but I have a letter to write—of some importance, too—and I perceive," he exclaimed, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel, "that I shall scarcely be enabled to save the post."

Thus speaking, he bowed and quitted the room.

"You will accompany me, Eleanor, to the parlour where Mr. Woodfall is waiting my return and your presence?" said the Earl, taking his wife's hand.

"Oh! certainly — if it will give you pleasure, Francis," she replied; a sudden emotion of pity—and even of remorse—springing up in her bosom at the idea that in a few hours she was to desert and abandon for ever the husband whose conduct had been characterised by unvarying kindness, generosity, and indulgence towards her.

The Earl grasped her hand somewhat tightly, as if with the impulse of one who feels that the hand so held in his own is trembling, and would therefore give it a reassuring pressure: then, leading her away from the room, the nobleman conducted his beauteous wife to the apartment where George Woodfall was seated.

The artist rose and bowed respectfully to the Countess of Desborough.

"Your ladyship will deem me very presumptuous," he said, "in venturing to solicit you to inspect that portrait,"—and he pointed towards the picture as it stood against a chair, wrapped up in the cloth in which he had brought it: "but as I believe that I have been more successful in this achievement than in any former effort of my pencil, I was vain enough to hope that your ladyship—and you also, my lord—would not be angry with me for submitting it to your opinion. It is a portrait—nothing more than a portrait;—but the portrait of a great criminal whose name recently produced no inconsiderable sensation throughout the country."

"And who may the hero of your picture be, Mr. Woodfall?" inquired the nobleman.

"Your lordship remembers the romantic trial in which the Aylesbury bankers figured as the culprits and Sir Richard Stamford as the prosecutor?" said the artist, interrogatively.

"Oh! perfectly well," was the Earl's prompt reply.

"And I, who cannot bear to read the accounts of criminal proceedings," observed Eleanor, "was deeply—or rather fearfully interested in that extraordinary trial! A lady of my acquaintance was present in the chapel on the morning when the condemned sermon was preached: and she assured me that one of the prisoners—Mr. Ramsey, I think—was a young man whose external appearance aroused feelings of the profoundest sympathy."

"I also was present on the sad occasion to which your ladyship alludes," said George Woodfall; "and it is Mr. Ramsey's portrait which I have painted from the recollection of his features. So vividly did they become impressed upon my memory, that I can at least take credit to myself for the fidelity of the delineation, whatever may be thought of the general workmanship."

Thus speaking, the young artist loosened the knots where the corners of the cloth were tied, and in a few moments withdrew the covering altogether.

The portrait was now revealed!

But—O horror!—Oh! the agonies—the appalling agonies of that moment, alike for the unhappy Earl and the maddened Countess of Desborough!

An ejaculation of despair burst from the former; but a wild cry, whose thrilling intonations betrayed all the excruciating anguish which tore her breast, broke from the lips of Eleanor—and, reeling half round, she fell senseless on the carpet.

"Cover up your picture—bear it away—this moment!" said the Earl, in a thick hoarse tone, and with a look of indescribable horror as he grasped Woodfall's arm convulsively. "We have recognised in that portrait some one whom we knew — under another name — and in earlier years —— But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself, lest in the excuses which he was attempting he might let drop something calculated to engender strange suspicions in the mind of the artist. "Pray leave us, Mr. Woodfall—pardon this scene—do not mention it elsewhere—it is very painful—and come and see me again in a day or two——"

While the nobleman was thus speaking in hurried and disjointed sentences and with a dreadful excitement of manner, Woodfall had replaced the covering over his picture; and he quitted the apartment just as the domestics, whose ears the thrilling scream of the Countess had reached, rushed thither to see what had occurred.

CHAPTER CIX.

THE OUTRAGED NOBLEMAN AND THE RESUSCITATED CRIMINAL.

PHILIP RAMSEY, unconscious of the terrible scene which had just occurred and of the appalling discovery that had been made respecting his identity, was pacing his own chamber—not with the agitation of alarm or of annoyance—but with the excitement of triumph and the restlessness that invariably attends even upon the flush of a proud success.

He had so admirably played the hypocrite that the treason he contemplated was now approaching its consummation: the noble woman, so basely deceived—so treacherously beguiled, had promised to fly with him;—the arrangements were settled—the plan was determined upon—and in a few hours would the appointed moment arrive at which she was to abandon her husband and her home for ever!

And why had the villain Ramsey thus plotted to annihilate all the little happiness that remained to the Earl?—why had he thus drawn the infernal meshes of his duplicity and deceit so completely around the confiding and generous-hearted Eleanor that naught but the last and most irreparable of woman's sacrifices would now content him?

His conduct was the result of cold-blooded calculations; and these calculations may be explained in a few words.

He knew that it was impossible for him to remain for ever beneath the roof of the Earl of Desborough. An accident—the merest chance—the slightest casualty, would betray him. Moreover, even if the tremendous secret connected with his real name, his true history, and his resuscitation from an ignominious fate,—even if this secret should remain undiscovered, was it not contrary to all rational hope that his amour with the Countess could continue much longer unsuspected or unperceived?

Thus, in either case and under any circumstances, Ramsey was living in the constant peril of expulsion from the home which he had found so miraculously and from the hospitality which he had abused so atrociously. The Earl's bounty had supplied him with some ready money: but this amount was totally insufficient to enable him to escape from the country and fly to some foreign clime. And yet he must lose no time in thus ensuring his safety!

What, then, was to be done? He had calculated that the Countess possessed costly jewels and at least some available pecuniary resources; and he resolved therefore to make her the companion of his flight. Besides, he had just so much regard for her as any profligate voluptuary experiences for a beautiful mistress: and he moreover thought it probable that a lady of her rank and connexions would never be left by her relatives without some amount of income, happen what might.

These were the calculations which the cold-blooded villain had made; and the reader is now in possession of the key to his conduct with regard to Eleanor. We have shown how well he succeeded in overruling the last scruples which remained in the bosom of the too confiding lady — and how triumphant was his persuasion that she who had already surrendered to him her honour in secret would make a public sacrifice of home, reputation, friends, and relatives, for his sake!

Glorying in that success — rejoicing in that triumph Philip Ramsey was pacing his apartment, when the door opened slowly and the Earl of Desborough staggered into his presence.

The ghastly pallor of the nobleman's countenance —the strange workings of his features—the wild expression of his eyes—the visible convulsion of his limbs—and the tottering unevenness in his pace,—all these appearances instantly struck Ramsey with dismay and carried to his guilty soul the terrible conviction that some appalling discovery had been made.

The Earl closed the door carefully—locked it—and placed the key in his pocket.

A cold shudder passed over Ramsey's frame: for the idea flashed to his mind that the outraged husband had discovered his wife's frailty and was come to wreak a deadly vengeance on *him*, the seducer!

But respecting this apprehension the wretch was almost immediately reassured; for the Earl, pointing to a chair, while he himself sank exhausted upon another, said, "Be seated! Whatever now takes place between us must be without excitement—without noise—without passion."

"What does your lordship mean?" demanded Ramsey, with the eagerness of a torturing impatience to learn the extent of the evil which now appeared to menace him.

"I mean, sir," responded the nobleman, continuing to speak in a voice so changed with thickness and hoarseness that it sounded like the worn out tones of old age,—"I mean that the moment when any unguarded proceeding on our part shall make *your* secret public—that instant will disgrace and dishonour, scorn and ridicule, redound also upon *me!*"

"Ah! my secret—then you know me?" murmured Ramsey, the frightful spasm which shot through his heart making him feel as if the hand of death were there: and he sank helplessly into the chair which he had been invited to take.

"Holy God! is it possible that such a tremendous misfortune should have fallen upon my head —upon that of my wife also?" exclaimed the Earl, with a groan that convulsed his entire frame as anguish tore it from the depths of his soul. "But thou—unhappy man—in what haze of horror is thine existence enveloped?—in what appalling mystery is thy fate involved? Thou, whom the world believes to be cold and stark in the narrow tomb——"

"In mercy, spare me!" cried Ramsey, suffering all the crucifixion of ineffable torture as these words struck like a barbed arrow into his heart: and, with eyes glaring wildly and brows hideously corrugated, his whole countenance was distorted as if his neck once more felt the pressure of the accursed noose.

"Well—well—I will seek no explanation on *that* head," said the nobleman, exercising a partial command over his feelings by dint of a tremendous and almost superhuman effort. "Little does it matter to me by what means you escaped the vengeance of the law: all my thoughts—all my ideas—all my feelings should be absorbed in the immense amount of wanton and heartless injury which you have inflicted upon me."

"My lord, you will deal mercifully with me?" exclaimed Ramsey. "Am I not a worm already crushed so thoroughly beneath the iron heel of an avenging society, that you can afford to spare—if not to pity me?"

"Spare you I will—pity you I cannot!" rejoined the Earl of Desborough. "And in sparing you, I act not through any considerations of mercy—but in order to avert a public scandal and the world's scorn from my house! The imposture you have practised upon me is venial—oh! yes—and your condition in *that* respect might indeed have commanded my pity: for, on that fatal night when you became an inmate of my dwelling, had you thrown yourself on your knees before me—revealed to me the astounding secret that you were Philip Ramsey the convict—and demanded my forbearance and my succour, I should not have refused your prayer! But you have planted a poisoned dagger in the bosom of my wife—you have made her not only an adultress, but the paramour of a man whose neck has been circled by the halter of the gibbet! Oh! there is the accursed infamy of your conduct—there is the degradation—there

the damnable wrong which you have perpetrated!"

And the nobleman, covering his face with his hands, broke forth into the bitterest lamentations.

But Ramsey saw that he was safe—that no positive retribution was intended—and that the Earl was prepared to strain every nerve and put every possible violence upon his own feelings rather than suffer it to be known to the world that the resuscitated criminal had been his own friend and his wife's lover. Yes—all this the villain saw and comprehended; and so appalling had been his fears at first, that the joy occasioned by this assurance of impunity and sense of safety nearly overwhelmed him.

And now that he was thus relieved from the most rending apprehensions, he experienced an ardent curiosity to learn how everything had been so suddenly discovered. Could the Countess have repented, and betrayed the secret of her amour and intended flight? No—that was a conjecture inconsistent with her character, her love, and her strength of mind. Besides, the idea would not account for the detection of his imposture as Gustavus Wakefield, and his identity as Philip Ramsey. How, then, was the discovery made? The mystery was impenetrable: it defied all the efforts of imagination! Not for an instant did it strike him that the visit of the artist and the exhibition of the picture could have any connexion with the sudden catastrophe.

"Mr. Ramsey—or rather Mr. Wakefield," resumed the Earl, again exercising a mastery over his feelings,—"for it makes my blood run cold in my veins to call you by the former name,—matters have reached that appalling crisis when reproaches are a folly and an absurdity. No possible invective which my lips might frame, could convey an idea of the tremendous sense of diabolical outrage which my soul experiences. Words are useless in dealing with such a case. The wrong is inflicted: its nature is horrible to contemplate! But, Oh! with what excruciating bitterness of feeling must I admit that I myself was to a great extent the accessory to my own dishonour and to my wife's immeasurable shame. For I knew that you had become her paramour——My God! I knew it——and now my punishment is a hell of the heart's emotions!"

And, springing from his seat, the Earl began to pace the room with all the frantic agitation of one whose brain was turning.

But suddenly pausing in his demented walk, he confronted Ramsey, saying in a low hoarse tone, "The sooner we separate, the better. In another hour it will be dusk; and my travelling-carriage will be at the door. If you consent to repair straight to Liverpool and thence embark for the United States, my purse is at your command."

"Greedily—gratefully do I embrace the opportunity," exclaimed the resuscitated.

"Talk not to me of gratitude—profane not good words by breathing them with your polluted lips!" said the Earl, his voice now suddenly changing to a passionate vehemence as he surveyed Ramsey with looks of indescribable disgust and abhorrence. "Here are five hundred pounds for your use," he exclaimed, tossing down a purse heavy with gold and rustling with bank-notes: "and, by the living God! if you venture to remain in England—if you do not proceed in my carriage direct to Liverpool, and thence depart without delay for America—I will show you no more mercy, but proclaim the fact of your existence to the world and set the blood-hounds of justice to hunt you to that destruction which you have escaped once!"

Having thus given vent to the menaces which his outraged feelings suggested, the Earl of Desborough quitted the room, banging the door violently behind him.

He repaired to his wife's chamber, which was darkened by the heavy curtains being drawn over the windows. Around the bed several persons were speaking in those solemn whispers in which words are exchanged by the couch of an invalid. Two physicians, a nurse, and three of the noble lady's female attendants were gathered there — watching the patient who was sleeping, but with an uneasy and convulsing slumber.

"What was the cause of this sudden fit?" inquired one of the physicians, addressing himself to the principal lady's-maid.

"I do not know, sir," was the reply. "The Earl and her ladyship were inspecting a picture in a room down-stairs, when suddenly a fearful shriek echoed through the house. We ran to the parlour from which it proceeded—and we found the Earl dreadfully agitated and her ladyship insensible."

"Ah! some family matter, doubtless," observed the physician.

"Is there any danger, sir?" inquired the lady's-maid.

"The greatest danger," was the prompt reply. "Your noble mistress has received a shock which may end fatally—or perhaps impair the nervous system for the remainder of her days——"

"Oh! my poor mistress!" sobbed the dependant, who was devotedly attached to Lady Desborough.

It was at this moment that the Earl entered the room; and, advancing on tiptoe towards the bed, he fixed his eyes with mournful earnestness upon the countenance of his wife. The maid-servants retired—and the nobleman, seating himself by the side of the couch, took Eleanor's hand in his own. It was cold—icy cold: he pressed it to his lips—he wept over it! Oh! the unhappy nobleman loved his wife tenderly—tenderly!

For upwards of an hour did he remain watching over her as she slept her troubled sleep. No rancour was in his thoughts with regard to her—no animosity in his looks: but he was all love, and affection, and pity, and compassion—that generous-hearted Earl!

At length, as a sudden remembrance struck him, he looked at his watch; and, gently abandoning Eleanor's hand, which all this time he had retained in his own, he issued noiselessly from the room. Hastening to an apartment the windows of which were in the front of the house, he looked forth into the Square.

The travelling-carriage was at the door: the postilion was already in the saddle.

A man, enveloped in a cloak, emerged from the house and entered the chaise, which immediately drove off—the occupant drawing up the blinds as it rolled away from the mansion.

Then some degree of relief was experienced by the Earl of Desborough, as he retraced his way to his wife's chamber: for the resuscitated criminal was no longer an inmate of his dwelling!

CHAPTER CX.

ROSE FOSTER AGAIN.

FIVE days had elapsed since that fatal night on which Rose Foster fell once more into the power of Mrs. Brace; and during this interval the orphan girl had been retained a close prisoner in a bed-chamber the windows of which looked upon the small yard that lay between the two houses. The door was kept constantly locked; and thus all possible precautions were taken against another escape.

Harriet the lady's-maid took her up her meals at the proper hours: but, although civil and obliging in her general conduct, the domestic held her peace when questioned by the terrified girl respecting the meaning of this imprisonment and the ultimate objects which Mrs. Brace might have in view concerning her. Vainly did Rose implore, through Harriet, an interview with the milliner, whom she hoped to be able to move with her entreaties and her tears if she could only see her: but Mrs. Brace went not near the afflicted, bewildered, and almost heart-broken girl.

Oh! how heavily—how wearily—and how miserably passed the time! By day the hours dragged their slow length along as if they were interminable; and by night the maiden could not sleep—for not only did the bitterness of her sorrow chase away slumber, but she feared to close her eyes lest some treacherous advantage should be taken of the moments of unconsciousness. Tears moistened her pillow—burning tears of anguish which afforded not the consolation that they usually impart when serving as a vent for grief,—but tears which flowed as it were from a heart gushing with a fountain of unextinguishable woe!

What had she done—this poor helpless, harmless girl—to be thus cruelly persecuted?—had heaven in her case forgotten its pledge to protect the fatherless?—or how had she deserved the infliction of so much misery? Her life had been pure and spotless: neither in word or deed had she ever offended against God or man;—and in those happier days which were gone apparently never to be recalled, she had dispensed her charities with no niggard hand. The poor mendicant had never been turned unaided away from the door of her parents' dwelling; and there were many, many kind acts which Rose had performed in secret but which were recorded in heaven's high Chancery to her account!

Alas! alas! she who had so frequently befriended the orphan, was now the victim of a bitter persecution in her own orphan state! Cold and cheerless was the great world to her: unblest seemed her lot—stern and rugged the path which her destiny traced out! A rose in beauty as well as in name, was she doomed to share the rose's fate and be plucked by the ruthless hand of the spoiler, to be scattered and strewn after having ministered to his evanescent caprice with its richness of perfume and its beauty of hue!

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon; and Rose was seated in her prison-chamber, with her head leaning upon her hand and her eyes fixed vacantly upon the floor. There were books on the table—there was a harp in one corner of the room—and there were materials for fancy-work at hand: but to none of her favourite recreations could the orphan turn her mind or direct her attention. Too deeply absorbed was she in her own sorrows to be able to follow in imagination the afflictions of the heroine of a romance: too harsh were the discordant notes that vibrated in her heart, to permit her feelings to hope that music would sooth them;—and the hands that were now so often wrung in despair could not be tutored to ply the needle!

Miserable—very miserable was the orphan;—and more than a hundred times in every hour did she wish that she was with her parents in that cold grave over which the roughest human foot may pass without injuring those who sleep beneath.

Suddenly the noise of the key turning in the lock fell upon the maiden's ear; and, starting from her reverie like a timid roe, she waited in breathless suspense and with affrighted looks for the presence of the visitor—this being an hour at which Harriet never was wont to make her appearance there.

The door opened—and Mrs. Brace advanced into the room with a smiling countenance and all her usual affability of manner.

"My dear child," she said, taking the orphan's hand and looking kindly upon her—so kindly that she must have been a very fiend incarnate if the honey of her smiles were belied by the venom in her heart,—"my dear child, I am come to see you at last! You have sent for me very often: but I have been so much engaged——"

"Oh! madam," exclaimed Rose, in a voice of the most touching pathos—withdrawing her hand at the same time,—"if you had any hope to give me or any humane feeling to testify towards me, surely you could have spared one single moment to become the bearer of the good tidings. But we will not exchange unnecessary words. Tell me at once—tell me, I conjure you—am I to consider myself a prisoner any longer?"

"*A prisoner* is not the proper term, my love," said the milliner, evasively. "You do not know who are your real friends: and therefore I was compelled to use a little restraint——"

"Compelled, madam!" exclaimed Rose. "Am I your slave—or your daughter—or your apprentice? No—I am none of these! By what shadow of right, then, do you exercise any control or coercion over me?"

"This is not language, my love, which it becomes you to utter or me to hear," said Mrs. Brace. "Do not excite yourself—I mean you no harm——"

"Madam," interrupted the orphan, with solemn earnestness of tone and manner,—"you do not know who I really am: but I will tell you!"

"Yes, my child—I am aware that Camilla Morton was but a feigned name," answered Mrs. Brace; "and that you are properly called Rose Foster. A sweet name is Rose—a name which I love dearly; and if you are a good girl and will only listen to reason, I will point out to you a path leading to such happiness that you will become the envy of all the other young ladies in my establishment."

"You know, then, who I am," said Rose, in a musing tone: "and yet you have no compassion upon the poor friendless orphan whose parents met with so dreadful a death! Oh! I am amazed—I am shocked: and if the world be full of such wickedness, suicide cannot possibly be a crime, inasmuch as it is the only means which heaven has placed in the power of the innocent and pure-minded to enable them to escape from ruin at the hands of

the cruel, the profligate, and the unprincipled! But since you know who I am, Mrs. Brace," exclaimed the orphan, with passionate vehemence,—"perhaps you are also aware that your friend Mr. Harley is none other than the Prince of Wales—the man whom circumstances point out as the moral murderer, although not the physical assassin, of my lamented parents!"

"Hush, my dear child—in the name of God! Do not talk in this wild and dreadful manner," said the milliner. "His Royal Highness wishes to see you—to throw himself at your feet—implore your pardon for the past—and learn in what way he can serve you for the future. Oh! you will find him contrite and full of sincere regrets;—and it will now be his joy and happiness, as well as his duty, to atone for all the sufferings which you have endured through any misconduct or indiscretion on his part."

"Is this possible?" exclaimed Rose, who, despite of the bitter experience which she had recently had of human perfidy, was still too artless, ingenuous, and confiding to suppose that the world's iniquity, hypocrisy, and deception could extend much farther.

"It is so possible, my dear child," answered Mrs. Brace, "that his Royal Highness will be here in an hour to confirm all I have just told you. Compose yourself, therefore, to receive him—and you will yet find that much happiness is in store for you."

Having thus spoken, the milliner pressed the young maiden's hand and hurried from the room: but as the key once more turned in the lock, a damp fell suddenly on the orphan's spirits and a secret voice appeared to whisper to her that she was again betrayed!

Yes—a flood of misgivings poured in unto her soul, for why should she still be retained captive?—and why was the Prince about to visit her in that bed-chamber?

But now a desperate energy nerved the friendless girl;—and, remembering with a species of heroic exultation the tremendous exploit that had saved her on the former occasion, she looked around for the means of escape. Alas! none met her view—no plan suggested itself! Useless were it to dare a second descent from the window. Such a proceeding would only land her in the yard, where her recapture must be inevitable.

But—ah! what hope is this which strikes her?—what scheme suddenly springs into existence in her mind?

Wild and romantic idea!—and yet is it not feasible?

Yes:—and she will attempt it without another instant's delay.

Seating herself at the table, she steadied her hand as well as she could to pen the following lines:—

"Whoever finds this, let him at once hasten to succour a persecuted girl who is held prisoner in the dwelling of Mrs. Brace, the dress-maker of Pall Mall. To a constable admission will not dare be refused; and let no excuse nor denial be received! The blessing of heaven will wait upon those who may rescue from dishonour the orphan

"ROSE FOSTER."

Having written this hasty billet, she folded it up and concealed it for the present in her bosom.

Her next proceedings were promptly undertaken and skilfully executed. With a piece of whalebone taken from a pair of stays, and by means of some twisted silk, she made a bow: then breaking off a thin rail from the back of a chair, she trimmed it with a knife until she reduced it to the degree of lightness fitting it to serve as an arrow. To the end of the stick she fastened her note; and opening the window gently, she shot the arrow completely over the roof of the adjacent house, so that she felt certain it must fall into St. James's Square.

Then, closing the window, she cut off the silk from the whalebone and burnt the thin shavings of the wood, so that not a trace of her proceeding remained visible inside the chamber.

Hope once more returned to the young maiden's bosom—for she looked upon the thought which had led to the step just adopted, as the inspiration of that heaven which had not deserted her.

And, Oh! in some minds—especially in those of youth—how elastic, how indestructible is hope! Sometimes, to be sure, it is but the last stand which the anguished soul makes against despair;—and not very far removed from this case was the position of Rose Foster now!

For had she not received sufficient proof of the unprincipled character of the heir-apparent and the extremes to which he was capable of venturing in order to gratify his passions or administer to his selfishness?—had not his heartlessness murdered her parents?—and was she not compelled to risk her own life in an appalling manner, to escape from his libidinous persecution?

All these reflections swept through the mind of the agitated girl, and nearly overwhelmed the hopes that had sprung up in her bosom; and as the moment approached at which his Royal Highness was to be there, a sense of colossal danger grew upon her with almost overwhelming effect.

At length she heard a stately step drawing near her chamber: the key turned in the lock—the door opened—and the Prince of Wales entered the room.

Closing the door behind him, he advanced with affable mien and extended hand towards the maiden, who stood motionless as a statue, and pale as the sculptured marble too,—but with her eyes fixed eagerly on his countenance as if to read her doom in his features!

Then, whether it were that she beheld some sinister light in his eyes—or whether some secret presentiment confirmed all her fears and utterly annihilated all her hopes, we know not: but certain it is that, suddenly starting into full and agonised life from that statue-like stillness, Rose Foster threw herself on her knees before the Prince—and, extending her clasped hands towards him, shrieked forth, "Mercy! mercy!"

"Silly maiden, of what are you afraid?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, hastening to raise her—or rather endeavouring to do so: but she resisted his attempt, withdrawing violently the hands which he had seized in his own. "Miss Foster—for I know who you are," continued George,—"I implore you to tranquillise yourself. Do not entertain so much mistrust concerning me!—do not look upon me with such cruel suspicion! Rise, I beseech you——"

"Does your Royal Highness swear that you come hither with friendly intentions only?" demanded the terrified girl—still remaining upon her knees, but averting herself almost shudderingly from the Prince.

[ROSE FOSTER.]

"I swear!" he exclaimed. "And now rise, Miss Foster—rise, and give me your attention and your patience."

"If your Royal Highness be truly sincere," said Rose, raising herself up, "you will at once lead the way to another apartment."

And, as she uttered these words, she moved towards the door.

"Stay, Miss Foster — and hear me," cried the Prince, interposing himself in such a manner that he effectually barred her passage from the room. "I must and will tell you all that I have to say——"

"Not here—not here!" ejaculated the maiden, her alarm rapidly heightening;—and, as she spoke, she endeavoured to glide past the Prince and gain the door.

But he seized her round the waist—and then a piercing shriek burst from her lips. A panic terror for an instant paralysed the royal voluptuary—and the orphan escaped from his arms before his lips had polluted her virgin cheeks with their hot and lustful kisses. Again she sprang towards the door: but the Prince, suddenly placing his back against it, exclaimed, "Miss Foster, I have said that you must and shall hear me—and, by heaven! I will keep my word!"

The unhappy girl, shrinking back in unspeakable terror, clasped her hands and fixed upon the heir-apparent a look so full of earnest entreaty and pathetic appealing, that had not his heart been made of the hardest granite those imploring eyes would have melted its callosity.

"Oh! will not your Royal Highness have pity upon me?" she exclaimed, once more falling upon her knees and addressing the unprincipled voluptuary in a rending tone. "My God! what have I done that your Royal Highness should become my bitterest enemy—my most relentless persecutor? All I ask is to be permitted to eat the bread of

mine own honest industry: but you—yes, you—the heir to the throne of these realms—are resolved upon reducing me to misery, ruin, and despair! And, oh! blame me not if your own conduct now wrings bitter and reproachful words from my lips:—but rather blame yourself for acting in a manner which compels me to remind your Royal Highness how cruelly—cruelly I have already suffered through you! Am I not an orphan—at the age of sixteen—deprived of those parents who loved me so well and whom I loved so tenderly in return;—and does not their death lie at your door? O God! when I think of all this, my brain reels—my blood boils—and I feel diabolical thoughts springing up in my mind—as if I craved for vengeance—I, who have never even trodden upon a worm, much less inflicted an injury upon a human being!"

And bending her head forward, the young maiden covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of tears.

The Prince stood irresolute: he knew not how to act. On the one hand he was maddened by the desire to possess that lovely girl who appeared to him even more charming than ever in the midst of the grief which convulsed her:—but on the other hand the reproaches to which she had just given utterance, raised something like a feeling of remorse in his soul.

Nearly a minute passed, during which his Royal Highness remained leaning against the door,—his eyes gloating upon the beauteous kneeling figure at his feet—and his compunctious feelings waging a severe struggle with his burning desires.

The violence of the orphan's grief having thus leisure to subside somewhat and the poignancy of her anguish to receive a slight mitigation, she withdrew her hands from her countenance—raised her eyes timidly—and was instantly struck by the expression of hesitation and uncertainty which was legibly depicted upon the features of her persecutor. A gleam of hope flashed to her soul; and starting to her feet once more, she hastily wiped away the tears—those drops of diamond dew that gave sweetness and softness to the light of the eyes on whose long lashes they hung!

"Your Royal Highness is touched by my appeal," she exclaimed, in a voice which was still broken by deep sobs, though during the intervals between those evidences of profoundly concentrated emotions it was tremulously clear and musically pathetic: "and you will not add to my afflictions by any outrage or wrong! Consider my position, great Prince—and have mercy upon me! An orphan and friendless, I have no protector—no vindicator! Bitter, bitter, is my lot in this world, heaven knows—and yet gall may be added to that bitterness, and my sorrows may be enhanced to despair. For, as there is a God above us, I vow that if disgrace, and shame, and ruin should overtake me, I will not survive that crowning misery—that consummating woe! No—never—never: but in a voluntary death—dark and terrible though the crime may be—will I end my wretched existence! Spare me, then—spare me, great Prince!—and let me depart hence in safety! Do this—and I will forgive you for the past—I will cease to look upon you as the cause of my parents' death! Oh! spare me—spare me!—on my knees again do I implore your Royal Highness to spare me!"

"Will you hear me for a single moment?" exclaimed the Prince, darting forward and sustaining her as she was about to sink into a suppliant posture once more: then, ere the shriek of terror which rose to her lips had time to burst forth, he quitted the slight hold that he had laid upon her and resumed his leaning attitude against the door. "Now you perceive," he said hastily, "that I am not unreasonable—that I can tutor myself to the exercise of forbearance—and that I deserve alike your attention and your patience."

"Speak, speak!" cried the trembling girl, casting down her eyes beneath the devouring looks of passion which he bent upon her. "What has your Royal Highness to say to me?—wherefore can you not be generous and grant my prayer at once?"

"Because I wish to make you a proposal, Rose," was the immediate response; "and I fervently hope—nay, I conjure you—that it may receive a calm and serious consideration."

"A proposal?" murmured the young orphan, with a cold shudder passing over her entire frame. "What proposal can the Prince of Wales have to make to an obscure, humble, and unhappy girl? Oh! none—none that is honourable and to which I ought to listen," she added, with wildness in her voice, her looks, and her manner.

"In the name of God, tranquillise yourself—it only for a few minutes!" exclaimed the Prince. "For it is precisely because you are obscure, humble, and unhappy that you should not turn a deaf ear to the words which I am about to utter. And start not when I declare that inasmuch as you are beautiful, and good, and virtuous, so do I love, and esteem, and admire you. But marriage is impossible—you know that I cannot address you with truthfulness and sincerity on that point; and the time for practising any duplicity or delusion towards you, is past! What, then, do I propose? That you should consent to be unto me as a wife, though without the name; and to you will I conduct myself as a tender and affectionate lover. Wealth, luxury, and profusion shall surround you: a splendid mansion shall be your residence—troops of menials shall attend upon you, ministering to your slightest wants—and when you roll through the park in your gorgeous equipage, who of all the beauties gathered there will be more envied, more admired, or more courted than the acknowledged mistress of the heir-apparent to the British throne?"

The Prince had been suffered to proceed uninterruptedly in his speech, because mingled shame and indignation had sealed the young virgin's lips,—shame at the thought that her character should be so lightly estimated as even to warrant the audacious proposal thus made to her—and indignation at the proposal itself! But as the Prince continued in the development of his plan, a faintness crept upon the maiden's heart—and anger gave way to terror, as the conviction was borne in unto her mind that the profligate persecutor was capable of any atrocity in order to obtain his ends. The colour came and went upon her cheeks a dozen times in a minute as these successive feelings and emotions agitated her bosom:—but when his Royal Highness beheld her pale countenance suddenly suffusing with a warm blush, he in his gross nature mistook the cause, and fancied that his proposal was received with an augmenting pleasure that had to struggle against virgin bashfulness.

Great was his surprise, therefore—ineffable was his amazement, when Rose Foster, suddenly inspired with the energy which is often furnished by despair, started from her trembling, timid attitude—drew herself up to the full of her graceful height—and extending her right arm towards him, exclaimed in a tone of command, "Silence—and pollute the air no longer with those words which are baleful as a pestilence!"

Oh! grand in thy virgin dignity—overpowering in thy maiden modesty wast thou at that moment, thou lovely and pure-minded orphan girl! The royal voluptuary—unable to believe the evidence of his own ears and eyes—was staggered by thy words and amazed by thy demeanour. And beautiful—Oh! incalculably beautiful was the effect of thy statuesque attitude and the noble expression of thy soft and touching features, at that moment animated with a sense of outrage and insult! Oh! deep, deep is the sympathy that we entertain for thee, thou virtuous and charming girl;—and sooner than the hand of the spoiler shall grasp thee rudely in the embrace of unhallowed lust—sooner than thy purity and thine innocence shall be sacrificed to the passions of thy persecutor—aye, and sooner than thou, with thine own consent, shall become the mistress of the royal profligate, we would see thee dead—laid in the cold grave—and we would ourselves exclaim, "Back, back to the realms of heaven, thou ray from Jehovah's brow!"

Yes—the Prince was indeed amazed and staggered by the words and the demeanour of the young orphan; and before he could recover from the state of feeling into which he was thus thrown, she addressed him with a solemn and touching earnestness which would have evoked a generous response from any other individual.

"No words, Prince of Wales," said Rose Foster, "can describe the indignation with which I reject—nay, scorn and recoil from, the proposal which you have dared to make me. The ladies of the Aristocracy may deem it an honour to become notorious as the Prince's favourite wantons: but the humble daughter of the People turns in loathing and wrath from the bare idea of such ignominy. Oh! well does the nation know that the higher the grade, the less virtue is to be found in it; and the despised, scorned, tyrant-ridden, and starving millions may take to themselves credit for virtues unknown amongst their titled oppressors. Go, Prince of Wales—go amongst your Duchesses, your Marchionesses, and your Countesses—and pay your court to *them*: you know full well that *they* will not refuse your love-suit, but will deem it an honour to surrender up all purity, innocence, and virtue at the shrine of Royalty. Yes—go to *them*: but dare not to breathe the same tale in *my* ears! The daughters of the People know that shame and infamy, however highly gilded, are shame and infamy still—and that the tarnish of a frail woman's reputation shows through the costliest veil with which the bounty and profusion of a royal lover may seek to conceal it! Now then, Prince of Wales, be generous—be great—be good—and allow me to depart in safety. I will thank you for this act of mercy, if you will concede it: for though I may more properly call it a deed of justice—yet will I speak of it and regard it in the light of a bounteous and humane concession from a mighty Prince towards an obscure and friendless orphan girl."

"By heaven! I know not how to answer you—how to deal with you, singular and incomprehensible creature that you are!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, who could not help thinking that if the maiden appeared ravishingly charming and profoundly interesting in the midst of her grief and tears, she was radiantly attractive and overpoweringly beautiful in the flush of her excitement and the goddess-like dignity of her attitude.

"In one word," she said, trembling inwardly through fear of a refusal, "I beseech your Royal Highness to suffer me to leave this room and this house—and everything that I have previously endured at your hands shall be forgotten."

"Oh! no—no," he exclaimed, his passion maddening him: "I cannot part with thee thus easily, thou adorable creature!"

And springing forward, he caught the young maiden in his arms.

A piercing scream burst from her lips—and she struggled desperately to tear herself from his embrace. But, excited almost to a delirious pitch by the fury of his desires, he seemed like a madman bent upon accomplishing his aim without the slightest regard for the consequences; and the wretched girl found her strength failing her and her senses ebbing away, as every moment saw her struggles becoming weaker and her cries more subdued,—while the triumph of the Prince appeared more and more certain.

But suddenly the door was burst violently open;—and Tim Meagles, followed by Melmoth the working man, rushed into the chamber.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE FRIENDSHIP OF ROYALTY!

To dash forward—hurl aside the Prince of Wales—and catch Rose Foster in his arms,—all this was the work of a single instant with Meagles;—and when his Royal Highness, uttering a terrible imprecation, was about to spring upon his friend Tim and deal him a savage blow, Melmoth seized upon the heir-apparent without hesitation, pinioning him fast despite of the desperate struggles he made to extricate himself.

But scarcely was all this accomplished, and Rose had begun to murmur a few words of heartfelt thanks to her brave deliverer, when three men armed with staves entered the room, followed by Mrs. Brace's two footmen, the milliner herself, and Harriet the lady's-maid.

The fact was that Meagles and Melmoth the working man, having been out together the whole morning instituting inquiries concerning Rose, were standing in St. James's Square deliberating what course they should pursue now, five days of research having already proved vain and fruitless,—when they observed an arrow lying upon the pavement near the enclosure; and curiosity prompted them to pick it up, to their indescribable amazement they found the note which at once cleared up everything in respect to Miss Foster's hitherto unaccountable disappearance. But as Tim Meagles was well aware that Mrs. Brace's establishment was secretly patronised and protected by the Prince of Wales,—and moreover, as the law gave him no power to force his way into it without the counte-

nance of some legal proceedings or the presence of some legal functionaries,—he hastened to procure the assistance of three constables. These officers went with him and Melmoth to the house, which they all unceremoniously entered; and, in spite of the remonstrances, threats, and entreaties of Mrs. Brace, a search was commenced throughout the premises. In a short time the screams issuing from a particular chamber led the party in that direction:—but on Mrs. Brace's hurriedly whispering to Meagles that the Prince was with Miss Foster and that a scandal must be avoided, he had ordered the constables to remain on the landing of the staircase, while he and Melmoth prosecuted the search by themselves. However, the noise of the struggling between Melmoth and the Prince and the terrible imprecation to which the latter gave vent, made the officers fear that violence was being used: and in order to adopt the necessary precautions to preserve the peace as well as to take any offender into custody, they hurried to the scene of action, despite the endeavours of the two tall footmen to hold them back and the entreaties of Mrs. Brace that they would not push their interference any farther.

The constables, who of course belonged to the parish, instantly recognised the Prince of Wales;—and, their ideas of justice being as immediately absorbed in the notion that as Kings can do no wrong, so the heirs of Kings must be equally incapable of offending, they at once and without a moment's hesitation rushed to his rescue. Melmoth the working man was unceremoniously knocked down and laid senseless on the carpet by the heavy staves of the functionaries;—and these legalised ruffians, having thus disposed of one of the persons who dared seek their assistance in order to interfere with the pleasures of his Royal Highness, thought that they could not possibly be doing the Prince a greater service than by knocking down the other person in a similar style. Quick as lightning, therefore, were their bludgeons turned from Melmoth upon Meagles; and the brave defenders of poor Rose Foster were both stretched powerless at her feet.

So rapidly had this second act in the drama passed, that the heir-apparent had not the time, even if he had possessed the inclination, to interfere on behalf of Tim Meagles;—and it was with a species of consternation that he beheld the sudden diversion created in his favour by the decided though inconsiderate course adopted by the constables.

A strange scene of confusion now followed. Rose Foster had fainted when she beheld her champions so summarily and ferociously dealt with;—and she was borne away by Mrs. Brace and Harriet to another chamber. Restoratives were administered to Tim Meagles and the working man;—and while these individuals were being recovered, the Prince of Wales paced the room with rapid and uneven steps, deliberating how he should act in regard to them.

That an irreconcileable breach had now suddenly occurred between himself and Meagles, was evident: and he knew Tim quite well enough to be aware that he was capable of proving as dangerous an enemy as he had been a valuable friend. The present crisis was an alarming and a difficult one,—especially as it might lead to an exposure of everything connected with Rose Foster's deceased parents and the causes which had led to the father's suicide and the mother's sudden death. Moreover, the Prince saw that in many other respects he was deeply in the power of Meagles; and he perceived at a glance that his ex-friend would sooner or later stand in the light of an extortioner demanding immense recompenses for former services rendered. These rewards, titles, honours, places, and pensions would be wrested by menaces instead of besought as boons;—and thus, in every point of view, was it quite clear to the Prince of Wales that if he ever intended to make an attempt to crush Meagles altogether, now was the time!

Such were the reflections that passed, with rapid sweep, through the mind of the Prince of Wales during the couple of minutes that he paced with uneven and agitated steps the chamber where so many varied and stirring incidents had occurred. To a man so thoroughly heartless and capable of such black ingratitude as his Royal Highness, it was not very difficult to arrive at a decision.

But even while he was yet wavering how to act, the senior constable, who bore the euphonious name of Bax, accosted him with many low bows, and gave every possible intimation, short of the utterance of words, that he craved permission to speak.

"Well, now—what is it?" demanded the Prince, observing that the man was fidgetting round about him.

"Please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Bax, with another very low bow, "these fellers must be took into custody for assault and battery on your Royal Highness's person. One of 'em I don't know nothink of," he continued, pointing towards Meagles: "but t'other," he added, indicating the working man, "is a very notorious character."

"Who is he, then?" asked the Prince, impatiently.

"His name's James Melmoth, may it please your Royal Highness," responded Bax; "and he's one of the most seditious scoundrels in all England. He speaks at public meetings—tells the working-classes they're oppressed—and denounces all Kings and Princes in a very savage style indeed, saving the presence of your Royal Highness."

"Ah! then the fellow must be crushed at once—or *he* will turn round upon me also," muttered the Prince to himself. "Damnation seize upon this dilemma into which I have worked myself! Yes—there is no alternative: the seditious villain must be crushed—or he will expose the entire affair at the very next public meeting he attends. But what do you purpose to do?" he demanded aloud, and looking Mr. Bax full in the face.

"I know my dooty as well as any man breathing—and so does my two partners here," replied the constable. "Why—what is the facts of the case? We happen to be passing by Mrs. Brace's establishment—and we see your Royal Highness standing inside the shop making a few purchases—when in come two ruffins, and without no manner of provocation they insults your Royal Highness—and well knowing who your Royal Highness was, they pitches into your Royal Highness—and your Royal Highness——"

"Good—good!" ejaculated the Prince. "I see that you understand how these little matters are managed. But are your companions to be equally well depended upon?"

"Quite, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Bax.

"Then let the two scoundrels be taken into cus

tody and conveyed to the Home Office," said the Prince, at the same time slipping his purse into the constable's hand. "And mind, Mr. Bax—as I shall not be there to give evidence,—mind, I say," continued the heir-apparent, fixing a look full of meaning upon the functionary,—"mind that they are *both* seditious characters—both notorious rogues and disaffected persons — both dangerous to the State——"

"Ah! that they be," observed Bax, with a glance that showed how well he understood the part he was to play in the matter. "And now, as they are both rekivering, I should advise your Royal Highness to withdraw."

"Your counsel is excellent," said the Prince. "I cannot condescend to bandy words with such men, should they seek to address me and implore my pardon for *this unprovoked outrage which they have perpetrated upon me.*"

Having thus spoken — and in this last sentence conveying to Mr. Bax a hint relative to the language in which his evidence was to be couched at the Home Office—the Prince of Wales quitted the chamber just at the moment when Tim Meagles and James Melmoth were being restored to complete consciousness.

Having hastily reassured Mrs. Brace respecting any fears which she might entertain of exposure, scandal, and disgrace,—and having recommended her to keep Rose Foster a close prisoner for the present, —his Royal Highness hurried back to Carlton House, which was only a couple of minutes' walk from the milliner's abode.

Immediately on reaching his private apartment, he summoned Germain to his presence, and addressed that faithful servitor in the following manner:—

"You will proceed without an instant's delay to the lodgings of Mr. Meagles in Jermyn Street. I know that he is not at home at this moment—neither will he return for some time. But you will say that you are anxious to see him and will therefore wait for him. When alone in his apartments you will open his desk—closets—cupboards—trunks—everything where letters or papers are likely to be kept; and all such letters and papers which you can find, you will conceal about your person and bring to me. Never mind about breaking open locks—hesitate not to force doors or drawers, so long as you accomplish my commands. And if interrupted by anybody, declare boldly that Mr. Meagles is in a scrape—and that he requires his papers to help him out of it. If need be that you should say more than this, then state with equal effrontery that you are my servant and that it is by my orders you are thus acting on behalf of my valued and esteemed friend Mr. Meagles. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Germain;—and, with a low bow, he retired to execute the commission thus entrusted to him.

The motive of the Prince of Wales in directing this step to be taken, may be explained in a few words. It was not that he suspected for a moment that Meagles had purloined from him the papers proving his marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert, and the half of the Lightfoot certificate: but it was because he himself had on many occasions written notes to Meagles upon private affairs which he was loth to have published to the world; and he thought it probable that Tim might have preserved those letters, in which case it was only prudent to regain possession of them.

We shall now follow Germain and ascertain the result of his mission.

On arriving at Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street, the French valet was informed (as indeed he had been led to expect) that Mr. Meagles was not at home. He accordingly declared that he wished to see him very particularly and would walk in and await his return. The polite landlady, who knew that he was in the service of the Prince, showed him up-stairs to Meagles' sitting apartment, where she of course left him.

The instant that he was alone, Germain began to inspect the place; and a writing-desk on a side-table immediately attracted his notice. It was locked: but before he broke it open, Germain took the precaution of trying all the keys that were upon a bunch in his own pocket;—and one of them happened to fit the desk. A hasty glance over the papers which it contained, enabled him to separate the letters and correspondence from the useless documents, such as tradesmen's bills, sporting memoranda, betting-records, &c.; and having completed his research in respect to the desk, the valet proceeded to examine the cupboards and drawers in the adjoining bed-room. He however discovered no more papers; — and pocketting those which were set aside to be taken away, he descended the stairs—observed to Wasp whom he encountered in the hall that he could not wait any longer—and returned to Carlton House.

The packet of documents which he had thus stolen from Meagles' lodgings, was now delivered into the hands of the Prince of Wales, who was impelled by motives of curiosity to inspect them forthwith.

But how great was his surprise—how profound his amazement, when he discovered amongst them the very correspondence which he had missed from his own desk some weeks previously, and which contained the proofs of his marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert!

"Then Meagles really *was* a traitor and a scoundrel!" cried the Prince aloud, as he assured himself that the papers were indeed the originals and no forged imitations. "He must have stolen them, the villain—stolen them from me, his benefactor and patron! But he will be punished at length—that is, if I know anything at all of English Home Secretaries and of Home Office proceedings. Ah! ah! Master Meagles—caught at last, eh?" exclaimed the heartless heir-apparent with a triumphant laugh. "Much as the Ministers dislike me as an individual, they have a profound veneration for Royalty—and they will save this Royalty from being in any way damaged, even though I am its representative who must now be vindicated. Yes—yes: there is no fear but that Meagles and his companion Melmoth will get the worst of it at the Home Office."

And again the treacherous, ungrateful Prince chuckled joyously.

Then, resuming his examination of the papers, he discovered not only the half of the Lightfoot certificate which he had lost, but likewise the remaining moiety;—and here was another cause for wonderment and satisfaction.

But there was still a packet of papers to inspect;—and, to his increasing surprise, the heir-apparent found that they were all in the handwriting of Mrs. Fitzherbert! And—Ah! to whom were they ad-

dressed? To the Marquis de Bellois—a nobleman whom his Royal Highness knew to be at that moment in England, and whose name had been more than once mentioned to him by Tim Meagles.

Impelled by a devouring curiosity, and also animated by startling suspicions, the Prince addressed himself to the task of perusing the numerous letters contained in this last mentioned packet. But—Oh! why does his cheek blanch?—why does his lip quiver?—why does he become nervous and trembling, as if a strange excitement be growing upon him? Yes—and more acutely wrung are his feelings, now that the damning truth is carried to his soul,—the truth that Mrs. Fitzherbert was faithless to his bed and had been the paramour of another! And more—Oh! more still remains behind: but it is speedily revealed—speedily developed by means of those letters. For Mrs. Fitzherbert had become a mother during her foreign tour: yes—that woman whom he had married—his own wife—had borne a child to the Marquis of Bellois!

Dashing down the papers, the Prince of Wales started from his seat and began to pace the room in an agitated manner.

It was true that his connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert was now completely broken off,—true also that she had been ignominiously expelled as it were from Carlton House,—true that he sought not to exercise any farther control over her. But he was wounded to the quick at the idea that he had so long been her dupe—that the late partner of his bed had played the harlot in a foreign clime and with a foreign noble—and that he had for years cherished the belief that, whether with him or absent from him, she had remained faithful to her love and her vows!

Then there sprang up in the heart of the Prince a bitter, burning hatred against the Marquis de Bellois, whom he looked upon as a successful rival—nay, whom he even regarded in the same light as a husband views the seducer of his wife. And upon this French refugee the Prince of Wales vowed to be avenged sooner or later, and by some means or another—he cared not how, but he hoped it would be soon!

The secret of Tim Meagles' success in compelling Mrs. Fitzherbert to leave Carlton House so abruptly, was now fully explained: it was evident to the Prince that he must have menaced that lady with exposure in respect to the amour whereof he possessed such damning proofs. Nor less did the possession of the Lightfoot certificate afford a complete clue to the tactics adopted by Meagles in negotiating with the King respecting the peerage and pension which had since been conferred, according to promise, upon Mr. Clarendon.

"Thank God," exclaimed the Prince of Wales, as he secured all the documents in his desk,—"thank God that I thought of sending Germain to rifle my late friend's lodgings. The incident at Mrs. Brace's this afternoon, although at first so menacing, has turned out entirely to my advantage, since it led to my becoming possessed of these most important papers. And another desirable result will be presently gained," he added, with a smile of haughty triumph: "for the villain Meagles is sure to be crushed beyond all possibility of redemption. Thank heaven, the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended just at this moment!"

CHAPTER CXII.

THE PROCEEDINGS AT THE HOME OFFICE.

Thus did the Prince of Wales congratulate himself upon the certainty of irretrievable ruin overtaking the man who, whatever fault he might have committed and whatever treachery he might have perpetrated in purloining papers from the heir-apparent's desk, had nevertheless served his Royal Highness with such fidelity and zeal on innumerable occasions as to deserve at least some degree of leniency at his hands.

But while the Prince was musing in that heartless style, an important investigation had already commenced at the Home Office.

In a lofty, spacious, and handsomely furnished apartment, three gentlemen were seated at a table. A clerk was employed in taking down the depositions at a desk near one of the windows;—and midway between the table and the desk Meagles and Melmoth were standing. Two of the constables guarded the door;—and Mr. Bax, the senior functionary, was under examination.

Of the three gentlemen at the table, the one who occupied the chair at the head was the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, his superior in that office being engaged elsewhere at a Cabinet Council. On the right hand sate the Attorney-General;—and on the left the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

The names and addresses of Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth had been duly taken down; and Mr. Bax was now giving his evidence—or rather *his* version of the affair involving the charge against the prisoners.

"Please, gentlemen," said the constable, "me and my two partners was walking along Pall Mall West quite promiscuously and saying nothin' to nobody, when we see a rayther stout gentleman in the shop of Mrs. Brace, the highly respectable milliner. Well——"

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed Meagles, who as well as his co-accused had hitherto been held speechless with amazement at the tremendous falsehood of the constable's preface: "so far from the Prince being in the shop——"

"Silence, prisoner!" said the Under-Secretary, sternly: "you will have an opportunity of cross-examining the witness presently."

"Very good, sir," observed Meagles, bowing respectfully.

"Don't answer me, sir—I tell you!" vociferated the Under-Secretary, flying into a passion.

"Your conduct is anything but like that of an innocent man, Mr. Meagles," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street, coldly and sternly.

"The impression you have already made on *my* mind is most unfavourable to you," added the Attorney-General, with a look full of hatred and spite at both the prisoners.

"Gentlemen, I can assure you——" began Meagles, more surprised than indignant at the observations just made: for he was wondering in what manner he could have offended so grievously and likewise so prejudicially to his own interests.

"Silence, once for all!" ejaculated the Under-Secretary.

"Or we shall be compelled to have you removed and go on with the evidence in your absence," observed the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

Meagles bit his lip almost till it bled—for he could scarcely repress a violent outburst of indignation at the cowardly bullying to which he was being subjected;—while James Melmoth found it equally difficult to restrain the fury that was boiling within him, and the effort to subdue which rent his very heart-strings with an excruciating anguish.

"Go on, Bax, with your statement," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

"Well, gentlemen," resumed the witness, "I was informing your honours how me and my two partners was a-walking promiscuously along Pall Mall when we see a rayther stout gentleman in Mrs. Brace's shop. At first his back was towards the door; but presently he turned round, and then we twigged——"

"Recognised, my good friend," suggested the Attorney-General, administering a verbal corrective in a tone whose blandness contrasted remarkably with that which he had adopted when speaking to Meagles.

"Thank'ee, sir—I meant to say *recognised*," continued Bax.

"And whom did you recognise?" asked the Chief Magistrate, also speaking in a mild voice and with agreeable manner.

"His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales," returned the constable. "He was talking to Mrs. Brace, which is a wery respectable lady as always pays her rates and taxes without a murmur and reg'larly illuminates her house on all Royal Birthdays."

"Ah! a truly loyal subject," observed the Under-Secretary, with an approving glance at the Attorney-General. "Please to continue your evidence, Mr. Bax."

"And let him remember he's on his oath!" exclaimed Melmoth sternly — for the working man was unable to subdue his feelings any longer.

"Silence, fellow!" ejaculated the Under-Secretary.

"These constant interruptions are intolerable!" cried the Chief Magistrate.

"They show clearly enough that the prisoners are aware of the desperate condition in which they have placed themselves," said the Attorney-General. "But such infamous attempts to intimidate the witness——"

"The attempts are made to intimidate *us!*" exclaimed Melmoth, with an energetic gesticulation.

"How dare you threaten to strike the witness?" vociferated the Under-Secretary, starting from his seat.

"I did no such thing—I only waved my arm in the air," replied Melmoth, undaunted by the menacing mien assumed by the Under-Secretary. "But let the witness go on and finish his story."

"Proceed, Mr. Bax," said the Chief Magistrate.

"Well, your honours," resumed the constable, "as his Royal Highness was giving his orders to Mrs. Brace, the two prisoners come along the street arm-in-arm, and looking wery disorderly: me and my partners instantly twigged — I mean recognised them—and we at once knowed them to be two of the most desperate spouters at public meetings——"

"I never was at a public political meeting in my life!" ejaculated Meagles.

"Oh! very well — you've committed yourself now," said the Attorney-General, with a sardonic smile of triumph as he caught up the prisoner's remark. "You declare that you were never at a *public* political meeting; and the natural inference of course is that the meetings which you *do* attend are of a *private* character. Very good, Mr. Meagles: you stand confessed a member of Secret Societies. Take that down in the depositions, Mr. Prescott," added the Attorney-General, speaking to the clerk.

"By heavens! I will not submit to this diabolical misinterpretation!" ejaculated Meagles, his countenance becoming crimson with wrath, and every vein on his forehead swelling almost to bursting.

"It is scandalous—perfectly fiend-like!" exclaimed Melmoth. "No Russian tyranny or Spanish inquisitorial despotism was ever worse."

"Silence—both of you—or you shall be removed immediately!" cried the Under-Secretary, who had posted himself upon the rug in front of the fire.

Tim Meagles threw a hasty look upon Melmoth, as much as to hint that they had better subdue their feelings as well as they could and let the witness proceed to the end; or else their removal from the room would deprive them of any little chance which they possessed of amending their own cause by shaking his testimony when the moment for cross-examining him should arrive. But that glance escaped not the lynx-eyed Attorney-General, who instantaneously rendered it available to his own purposes.

"Did you observe those looks of intelligence which passed between the prisoners?" he demanded, addressing himself to the Under-Secretary and the Chief Magistrate: and, as they both nodded their heads affirmatively, the great legal functionary continued to exclaim, "Every step that is taken in this investigation yields fresh proofs of the dangerous characters of these men. Not only do they belong to Secret Societies, *by their own unguarded admissions*—but they actually carry their presumption so far as to communicate with each other by means of secret signs in our presence!"

"'Tis false—false as hell!" ejaculated Melmoth, stamping his foot furiously upon the carpet.

"Do not let us be provoked into intemperate language, my good friend," said Meagles, earnestly. "I beseech you to be tranquil for the present."

Melmoth bit his lip and held his peace: but the agitated workings of his countenance plainly indicated how poignantly his soul was tortured by the effort which he was compelled to make to subdue a terrific explosion of those outraged feelings that sought a vent.

"Proceed, Mr. Bax," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

"I was observing, gentlemen," resumed the witness, "that while his Royal Highness was in Mrs. Brace's shop, a-talking to a young gal there——I mean to the milliner herself," he hastened to add,—"them two prisoners come along the street in a disorderly manner, and looking just as if they was anxious to get up a row and collect a mob. Me and my partners, knowing them to be seditious characters and evil-disposed persons, kept a eye upon them: and, lo and behold! they walks straight into Mrs. Brace's shop—begins pulling the bonnets, the gowns, and the gals about—and takes liberties with the lady herself. The Prince very nat'rally remonstrated with them; but scarcely had he begged them to take

theirselves off, when one gives him a poult in the eye, and t'other a dab on the cheek—and there's no doubt in the world that his Royal Highness would have been killed stone dead in less than a minute if me and my partners hadn't rushed in and scured the rioters. A more unperwoked outrage I never vitnessed in all my life."

"And did the prisoners know that it was his Royal Highness whom they were thus atrociously, brutally, and barbarously attacking?" inquired the Attorney-General.

"To be sure they did!" ejaculated Mr. Bax. "For they told him that they should like to serve his d——d old father in the same way."

"Did they utter any treasonable language?" demanded the Attorney-General. "I mean, did they say anything which led you to believe that they aimed at the overthrow of the monarchical institutions of this country?"

"Oh! plenty of such sayings as them," returned Bax.

"I suppose that the prisoner Meagles alluded to Republicanism and French affairs?" said the Attorney-General, interrogatively.

"He talked about pitching the throne to the devil," responded Mr. Bax; "and he declared that the English people was fools not to imitate the French."

"And the prisoner Melmoth—did he give his assent to those observations?" asked the Attorney-General.

"Oh! he was quite as bad as t'other and said as how that all Kings was tyrants," replied the constable.

"That will do, Mr. Bax," said the great law officer. "You have given your evidence in a very straightforward, candid, and praiseworthy manner; —and if the prisoners will allow *me* to offer them a suggestion, I should advise that they do not aggravate their guilt by any useless bravado, such as cross-examining the witness—but that they at once throw themselves on the mercy of the Government."

"Mercy, indeed!" echoed Meagles, with a bitter tone and a disdainful manner. "No, sir—we are well aware that mercy exists not in the quarter where you would persuade us to look for it: but we will see whether there be anything like *justice* in this tribunal before which we now stand. I presume that the moment has now arrived for the cross-examination of this witness?"

"Yes—if you persist in a course so vitally prejudicial to your own interests," observed the Attorney-General.

Meagles condescended not to vouchsafe any reply to the remark: but, turning towards Mr. Bax, he said, "Upon your oath—your solemn oath—have you told the truth?"

"That question cannot be allowed," interposed the Attorney-General. "If Mr. Bax should admit that he has spoken falsely, he would be liable to a prosecution for perjury—and no witness can be allowed to criminate himself."

"Then I will ask him," exclaimed Meagles, "whether my fellow-prisoner and myself did not seek him at his own house and require his assistance to rescue a young lady——"

"I really cannot permit this line of cross-examination," cried the Attorney-General. "While pretending to ask a question, you are entering upon matter quite extraneous——"

"I will show you in a moment, sir," interrupted Meagles, "how the case of the young lady alluded to, is intimately associated with the causes of my arrest and that of my fellow-prisoner."

"No young lady has been specifically mentioned in the evidence," replied the Attorney-General doggedly; "and therefore I cannot permit you to conjure up the phantom of such a young lady to suit your own particular purposes."

"But it was in consequence of the vile persecution of this young lady by the Prince of Wales,' exclaimed Meagles, "that——"

"No persecution was mentioned by the witness Bax," said the law-officer. "Keep to his evidence, sir—and cross-question him thereupon."

"I will ask him, then," resumed Meagles, beginning to be much perplexed by the nature of the proceedings,—"whether I did not in the first instance call upon him to accompany me to Mrs. Brace's house——"

"This certainly is most irrelevant!" interposed the Chief Magistrate.

"Most decidedly!" added the Under-Secretary. "It cannot be tolerated for a moment. It is against all rule——"

"And law," observed the Chief Magistrate.

"And precedent," exclaimed the Attorney-General.

"Then I had better hold my peace," cried Meagles, in a tone of extreme bitterness: "for I see plainly enough that you are bent upon accomplishing our ruin. Melmoth, my good friend," he added, turning towards the working man,—"I should advise you to abandon all hope of profiting by the cross-examination of that perjured scoundrel."

"Stand aside, Mr. Bax!" exclaimed the Attorney-General, unable to conceal his delight at having thus so easily got rid of any farther opposition to the witness. "Come — let your companions be sworn."

The other two constables accordingly stood forward; and each, in his turn, deposed to the truth of the statement already made by Mr. Bax, the Attorney-General putting to them such leading questions that they could not possibly mistake the answers which he was desirous of eliciting. Meagles and Melmoth both endeavoured to cross-examine them: but at every query they put, the Attorney-General objected. One question was "irregular;" —another was "irrelevant;"—a third was entirely in opposition to "all precedent;"—and a fourth came within the style of cross-examination which some very learned judge who lived a few centuries back, in a very barbarian age, had thought proper to disallow and prohibit. The result of all the objections thus raised by the Attorney-General, was that the witnesses were not permitted to respond to a single query calculated to shake their testimony or throw any real light upon the proceedings.

Mr. Prescott was now required to read over the depositions; which he did in a sing-song, parish-clerk kind of a tone—doubtless to the great edification of the Government officials, but to the unmitigated disgust of the prisoners, who had not as yet seen a glimpse of common sense or common justice throughout the entire proceeding.

The Attorney-General and the Chief Magistrate then drew up a report to the effect that, whereas certain evil-disposed, wicked, and seditious persons —to wit, Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, not having the fear of God before their eyes, but

instigated by the Devil, had conspired, did conspire, and were found conspiring against the throne and kingly authority of these realms; and moreover did compass, imagine, conceive, intend, project, devise, purpose, and purport to depose his most Gracious Majesty from the style, title, and dignity of Sovereign of the British dominions; and whereas in order to accomplish, perform, and devise, and do what they had so wickedly compassed, imagined conceived, intended, projected, purposed, and purported, they did in the first place assume disorderly and seditious looks and evil-intentioned mien in the public streets, to the great dismay, consternation, and alarm of certain of his Majesty's loving and dutiful subjects, thereby endangering the peace of these realms, and the peace of these realms being so endangered; and whereas the said Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, while thus wickedly and seditiously menacing the State with civil war, did raise their arms against the person of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, thereby committing certain wicked and seditious acts of assault and battery on the sacred person of the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms; and whereas it had been held that the raising of arms is the same as appearing in arms, and that therefore the said wicked and evil-disposed persons, Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, were proven to have appeared in arms for certain treasonable and rebellious purposes against their Sovereign Lord the King; and whereas upon their own admission they did belong to certain secret, illegal, and unlawful societies, and that they had also communicated and conversed by means of certain secret signs in the presence of certain of his Majesty's civil authorities engaged in examining into all these and other sundry and divers charges; and whereas it was established by evidence that the said Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth were notoriously disaffected, seditious, wickedly disposed,

and riotous persons, not having the fear of God before their eyes, but instigated by the Devil; and whereas the political guarantees commonly known as the Habeas Corpus Act were at this time suspended in order that powers might be invested in the hands of his Majesty's Government to repress sedition and maintain peace and order within these realms; therefore the undersigned, his Majesty's Attorney-General and his Majesty's Chief Magistrate of the Police, did thereby recommend that the aforesaid Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth should be summarily dealt with as disorderly characters and evil-disposed persons, &c., &c.

This precious document having been duly drawn up and signed, was attested by the Under-Secretary and forthwith despatched to the Foreign Office where the Cabinet Council was sitting, in order that it might receive the signature of the Secretary of State. Extreme promptitude characterised the whole proceedings; and when the document was returned in the space of ten minutes with the name of the Home Minister attached to it, the Under-Secretary at once directed that Meagles and Melmoth should be deported from the country without delay.

Vainly did the prisoners remonstrate against this tyrannical conduct: vainly did they demand to be heard in explanation of the transaction which had led to their arrest;—and with equal fruitlessness did they request to be regularly committed for trial. Stern and inexorable negatives were the only response they could elicit: for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act gave the Government illimitable powers —and those powers were not likely to be used either leniently or humanely by the Ministers of that accursed tyrant George III.

It was scarcely dusk in the evening of this memorable day when Tim Meagles and James Melmoth were thrust handcuffed and carefully guarded into a post-chaise which received them at the door of the Home Office. The only indulgence they could obtain was a promise that on their arrival at Woolwich, which was the immediate place of their destination, they should be allowed to write a few lines to inform their relatives or friends "*that they had been detected in treasonable designs against the Sovereign, but that through the leniency of the paternal Government they were permitted to repair without delay to North America, on condition that they never again returned to their native land!*"

It would be difficult to describe the feelings of the two prisoners, as they found themselves being whirled rapidly along the road towards Woolwich,—with chains upon their hands and a couple of armed peace officers seated opposite to them in the vehicle.

Melmoth thought of his poor wife and children —and the cold shudder of despair passed through his entire frame every time he asked himself what was now to become of them? His wife loved him tenderly; and this sudden and unexpected separation might be the death of her, sickly as she was. At all events, even if she should survive the blow, she was already too weak in health and would become too deeply depressed in spirits to be enabled to toil for the maintenance of herself and children. Oh! these reflections were maddening—maddening; —and more than once the strong man groaned aloud, during the rapid and brief journey to Woolwich, as the whole current of his blood appeared to rush suddenly to his heart and brain under the influence of those harrowing thoughts!

And Meagles—how did he bear his misfortune? Somewhat more calmly and philosophically, because he had no wife and children upon whose heads this calamity would rebound. The feelings which animated his breast, were moreover of a bitter, burning hatred against the treacherous Prince, rather than of a softer nature such as a husband and a father would have experienced. Nevertheless, he sighed—profoundly sighed, as he thought of poor Rose Foster; and tears stole down his cheeks as he wondered what now would become of the friendless, persecuted orphan!

To both Meagles and Melmoth the whole adventure wore at times the aspect of a dream. Its suddenness—the hurry of the incidents through which they had passed—the extraordinary change that a few hours had effected in their circumstances—and the tremendous engine of despotism which in "merry England" had been set in motion to crush and annihilate them,—all seemed the details of a fantastic vision rather than the consecutive occurrences of stern reality.

At the Green Man at Blackheath the chaise halted for a few minutes: but the prisoners were not suffered to alight—nor did their custodians leave them. The postilion entered the tap belonging to the establishment, to procure some refreshment;—and from that place came the voices of revellers, singing in chorus over their ale. The song was one about "British freedom," and it contained a verse vowing devotion to "our good King George." Alas! those thoughtless beings paused not to reflect that British liberty was a mere idle phantom, cheating the eye and deluding the heart—and that their King was one of the most cold-blooded tyrants that ever the Almighty sent upon the earth to be a scourge and a curse to erring mortals!

On went the chaise again: and at length the lights of Woolwich gleamed in the distance. Another quarter of an hour, and the vehicle rolled into the town—proceeding straight to the dockyard. There it stopped;—the two prisoners were ordered to alight — and they were conducted into a little office, where, their manacles being removed, they were informed that they were at liberty to write the letters to their friends according to the promise made to them at the Home Office. It was however represented to them by the senior peace-officer to whose charge they had been entrusted, that the epistles must be couched in the sense already suggested, and that no comment upon the proceedings would be allowed. In a word, they were not to detail the facts according to the truth, but according to the version which had been recorded in the depositions: and the epistle which each prisoner wrote was therefore circumscribed to a few lines. That of Tim Meagles was addressed to Mrs. Piggleberry, who he was well aware would lose no time in communicating its contents to Lady Lade;—and that of James Melmoth was written to his poor wife.

When the letters were finished, the senior peace-officer took charge of them, with a promise that they should be delivered as early as possible in the morning;—and the two prisoners, having been re-manacled, were consigned to the care of a corporal and four soldiers, by whom they were marched down to the wharf.

The evening was very dark: neither moon nor star shone upon the face of heaven—and the obscurity was only broken by the lights gleaming in

the windows of the arsenal and in the ships moored off the shore.

The soldiers conducted Meagles and the working man, both of whom were still handcuffed, down the slippery steps leading to the river; and at the bottom of the flight a boat was waiting, manned by six sailors under the command of a midshipman. The moment the soldiers and their two prisoners had entered the boat, it put off and rowed in the direction of a large ship which lay at a short distance, and through the port-holes of which lights were gleaming—so that it appeared as if a slightly curving row of lamps were suspended over the dark bosom of the river.

It was now by an effort of extraordinary skill, the most remarkable feature of which was the noiselessness wherewith it was accomplished, that James Melmoth succeeded in slipping off his manacles: but he held them in such a manner that their occasional clinking should prevent any suspicion of their removal.

In a few minutes the boat ran alongside the man-of-war which lay so still and stately upon the river; —and the two captives were ordered to ascend the accommodation-ladder to the deck.

Meagles went first: but scarcely had he mounted half-a-dozen steps, when a loud splash was heard, instantaneously followed by ejaculations of mingled terror and amazement from the soldiers and the sailors in the boat.

"Watch where he rises—and fire!" exclaimed the corporal.

"He has dived—underneath the ship itself, perhaps!" cried one of the private soldiers.

And then arose on board the man-of-war, echoing from stem to stern, the cry of "Some one overboard!" —and the ship, a moment before so silent, was now a scene of agitation and excitement throughout.

All this was the work of a few instants: but Meagles had immediately comprehended the startling truth, that his late companion in captivity had made a desperate effort and dared a tremendous risk in order to escape from his persecutors.

"God send him success!" muttered Tim, as a couple of sailors hurried him up the accommodation-ladder to the deck, where he was given in charge to the officer of marines.

Meantime all the boats were lowered—and lanterns were hung over the ship's sides; and the marines on deck were prepared to fire at Melmoth should he, upon re-appearing above the water, seem to have any chance of escaping from the galleys now rowing about in search of him. The tidings of his escape were communicated to the adjacent vessels and likewise to the shore;—and that portion of the river became completely illuminated with the lanterns hung out by the shipping and along the wharves.

But all these measures were vain and useless: James Melmoth re-appeared not to the view of those who were thus hunting him with blood-hound eagerness; and the impression soon became general that he must have perished in his desperate attempt.

Meagles shared in this belief—and great as his own afflictions were, he nevertheless had leisure and feeling enough to heave a sigh and drop a tear to the memory of the persecuted working man!

On the following morning, soon after sun-rise, the *Diana* frigate weighed anchor; and, her white canvass filling with a strong and favourable wind, she stood gallantly down the river—bearing away, within the prisonage of her wooden walls, the once dashing, rollicking, intrepid, and adventure-loving Tim Meagles!

CHAPTER CXIII.

THE ROYAL LOVER'S VICTIM.

We must now conduct our readers to an apartment in a little villa belonging to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and situated in the vicinity of Aylesbury.

This room to which we have just alluded was in a state of confusion; while some of its features indicated, alas! too plainly, the mental condition of that lovely creature who was its occupant! For there were bars to the windows and a strong iron grating over the fire-place: the door, which was chained outside, had a small trap to enable the physician, the nurse, or other attendants to satisfy themselves from time to time as to what the patient was doing within;—and all the furniture was so massive as to defy even the maniac strength which some sudden inclination for mischief might prompt to havoc and destructiveness. The chairs were however all scattered pell-mell about—some overturned —one piled upon another:—the carpet was rolled away from a portion of the floor;—the drawers were all open—and various articles of female apparel were lying here and there.

But who is she—that lovely young woman—with her attire hanging negligently about her and her hair in disorder? Upon her head she wears a crown cut out of paper—and in her hand she carries a sceptre formed of the same material! There is a mingling of melancholy and wildness in her looks—a glitter of restlessness combined with an expression of touching pathos, evincing the sad truth that the flame of intellect burns steadily no longer, although the warmth of feeling be still the same!

Oh! whither does her imagination wander, like a troubled dove unable to find its ark? Alas! alas! for that unhappy girl whose mind has become a chimera exercising the baleful influence of the Medusa-head to petrify all the wholesome thoughts that may chance to look in upon her soul!

For that same imagination which so lately proved the active element of her life's happiness and made her love the source of so many Eden-like joys,—which decked fancy's temples with the fairest and brightest flowers, and revelled in the wildest and most romantic castle-building upon the enchanted ground of a foreshadowed future,—this same imagination it is that now substitutes wretched phantoms for glowing poesy and the silliest dreams for the most exalted imagery! Yes—that etherial spirit which was wont to soar like the flight of eagles above the clouds and penetrate even unto the realms of God's own glory,—has now changed into the unwholesome vapour of a will-o'-the-wisp ignobly coursing along the surface of the quagmires of the world.

But, oh! what emotion of the hidden being brings that deep flush at one instant to her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom—and in another moment chases away the roseate glow and leaves her pale as a marble statue?

Now an indescribable dignity pervades that superb creature, as she seats herself upon a table, fancying it a throne—and places her feet upon a chair, believing

it a royal footstool! For some minutes she remains still and queen-like, as if gazing upon a troop of courtiers kneeling around her: the delusion fills her with happiness—a flood of joy pours in unto her soul—her eyes light up magnificently—her countenance glows with the lustre and the richness of animation—her neck arches grandly—and her bosom swells with sensations of gratified ambition and proud triumph.

Suddenly a thought appears to strike her. 'Tis a momentary gleam of reason that darts athwart her brain, as the flashing levin breaks on a night of gloom: and, oh! how instantaneously the brightness passes away from her features and the cloud comes and settles thereon! For that gleam of intelligence, vivid as it is evanescent, dissipates her joyous illusion in a moment: and although her ideas relapse into chaos and confusion, yet does some sad and mournful impression — some strange and lurking misgiving remain uppermost in her mind;—and, in obedience thereto, she slowly takes off her crown and examines it together with her sceptre. Intently—oh! how intently she gazes upon those objects: then her look becomes frightened, like that of an innocent maiden struck by a first suspicion of her lover's treachery;—now her gaze is rivetted upon the royal symbols again;— and then bewilderment, terror, and awe gradually arise and mingle in her regard—like the look which we can fancy Eve to have sent forth from the gates of her Eden into the dimness of that unknown world upon whose face she was doomed to enter!

"Oh! is this the crown which I once hoped to wear?—and is this the sceptre which I believed myself destined to wield?" exclaimed poor Octavia Clarendon, her lips at length expressing the cruel doubts which had sprung up in her soul. "No—no: it was to be a crown covered with jewels and glistening with gems—and a sceptre of gold that would not break so easily as this! But my beloved one will soon appear and bring me the crown and the sceptre which he promised. Oh! why does he not come immediately?—for I have already waited long and patiently for my Prince! Sometimes I think that I am a strange, wild, and fanciful girl—and all my ideas, though plain enough, nevertheless glitter in confusion like the spangles upon a robe that is shaken, or like the gleaming meteors in the north when the polar night puts forth its pomps and splendours. But, oh! this confusion is brilliantly beautiful—and amidst it all I behold my Prince clad in royal garments and extending his arms towards me! Nevertheless," she continued, with a reflective air and in a tone of deeper pathos, "they will not let me hasten forward to meet him. Oh! why is this?—wherefore are we separated? Let me fly to his arms—or my soul will become a fountain evermore to gush with bitter tears! I will make the very air burn with my passionate sighs, if they keep me any longer from my Prince!"

Suddenly her entire manner changed: the melting beauty of her eyes gave place to a wild and terrible lustre which shot forth like lightning-shafts; — her countenance became colourless, ghastly, and distorted with anguish; — and her bosom rose and fell with a violence and a rapidity evincing that a profound agitation raged within.

"Away, ye vile and despicable baubles!" she exclaimed, starting from her seat on the table, and dashing the paper crown and sceptre upon the floor: "ye are the emblems of that deceit, and cruelty, and treachery which made me what I am! Oh! thou demon-hearted Prince, hast thou no mercy — no compassion — no sympathy for thy wronged and ruined Octavia? Wherefore hast thou blighted all the hopes of my youth?—why hast thou carried desolation and woe into the sanctuary of that heart which was filled with love for thee? O God! do thy thunders sleep? — O heaven! hast thou no lightnings left? Give me the wand of an enchantress and I will bring an universal deluge on the earth, that *he* may be swept away from the theatre of his crimes—yes, even though myself and all the world suffer annihilation at the same moment! Or let the mountains fall upon the nations, and crush the entire human species back, back into its pristine elements—so that *he* may perish miserably, miserably! Would that my words were daggers or that my looks were arrows, that they might go forth and pierce him to the heart! Revenge—revenge! shall I not be blessed with a full, complete, and crowning revenge for all my wrongs? Oh! let me think only of revenge!—let it be my reverie by day and my dream by night! Yes—I will cherish thee, thou fiend-like idea, as I once cherished the love that hath turned to this implacable hatred: — I will cherish thee as I would nurture an innocent babe, were I a mother;—I will cherish thee—Oh! I will cherish thee as the religionist clings to his hope of salvation! Thou shalt wall me round and imprison me in one circle of sensations—thou shalt confine me to the narrow space of one idea even as the Roman vestal, when seduced from her duty by the blandishments of love, was enclosed in a tomb of massive masonry. And yet—oh! my God—could I hurt that man whom I have adored and worshipped?—could I without emotion behold him dying or dead at my feet? No—no—never!"

And as the wretched girl thus shrieked wildly forth, a strong shudder passed through her frame, and she fell on her knees—joining her hands and clasping them convulsively at the same time.

"O ruined, heart-riven creature that I am!" she said, in a low voice fraught with a pathos ineffably touching and tenderly musical: "wherefore have my own feelings become scorpions to sting and scourges to lacerate my bruised and wounded soul? Will heaven send no anodyne to sooth and heal? Oh! yes—for heaven is kind, and merciful, and good, and blesses the parched flowers of the garden with its reviving dew! Hear, then, my prayer, O Providence!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes with a holy earnestness; "and give me hope—give me comfort—give me happiness! Alas, alas! no solace comes: my brain reels—I suffer excruciating agonies in the hell of mine own thoughts—ghastly forms rise up before me—hideous shapes surround me! Adieu, adieu to all refuge against myself: miserable, miserable girl that I am, the torrent of my ideas whirls me along in a flood of burning lava! Avaunt, ye harrowing recollections—begone, ye racking memories! Oh! that the past were a blank—that the present were unfelt, unknown — and that I might waken to the view of a smiling future's roseate dawn! But this may not be: I am lost—lost—beyond all redemption lost! Darkness closes in around me—a stupendous blackness, deeper than a funeral pall, is enveloping me. Earth and heaven are pass-

ing away—all is an abyss, into which I am precipitating! Powers of heaven! will ye not stay my headlong flight? Oh! mercy—mercy—mercy!"

And covering her face with her hands, Octavia became convulsed with grief.

The ravings of her tongue ceased: but her soul was agaitated like the ocean when the storm sweeps over it. Upon her knees did she still remain—strong spasms shooting through the limbs that were thus bent under her, and likewise through the arms which had been wont to clasp the neck of her royal seducer.

For some minutes did she thus endure the unspeakable anguish of thoughts, and fancies, and imaginings the nature of which no human conjecture can probe: but at length she slowly removed her hands from her countenance, and gradually raised herself up from her kneeling posture.

Then, sinking on a chair, she fell into a reverie so deep—so profound, that her physical as well as her moral nature was locked up in the thoughts which now absorbed her entire being. Motionless was she as the sculptured marble: not a finger moved—her bosom heaved not to the respiration—and her lips remained slightly apart as they were at the instant when this waking trance seized upon her. So passionless was the repose of her countenance—so fixed were the eyes—so still was every feature, that had it not been for the faint shade of the pink upon her cheeks, she would have cheated the gaze of a beholder into the belief that she was indeed a statue. From the depths of her soul, whatever thoughts were agitating there, not a ripple reached the marble surface of her features;—and if it were despair that thus retained her limbs and looks spell-bound, it must have been that blank numbness which freezes every sense with the ice-chill of its utter hopelessness.

Upwards of an hour had passed during which Octavia Clarendon's mind and conduct underwent the various changes which we have endeavoured to describe in this chapter; and the reader has observed that in one mood she fancied herself a Princess or a Queen—in another she saw the delusion of that belief: now she retained her love for her seducer whose speedy arrival she expected,—and then she gave way to sentiments of the most implacable hatred towards him;—now she laboured under a fearful excitement,—and then she fell into a reverie which held her motionless and still as death!

But during the hour which had thus passed away, the little trap or wicket in the door of the chamber had been gently lifted more than once; and an old woman, with a benevolent countenance had looked anxiously but cautiously into the apartment:—then, having satisfied herself that Octavia was inflicting no injury upon her own person, the female withdrew, closing the wicket as gently as she had opened it.

The unfortunate young lady had remained upwards of twenty minutes in that deep, deep reverie which we have described above, and which was the most melancholy of all the varied phases wherein her mental aberration showed itself;—twenty minutes of fathomless meditation, in which the soul and the body both looked inwardly and saw nothing outwardly!

It was about the expiration of this interval, that the wicket was raised noiselessly again—and first the countenance of the old woman appeared—and then a young and lovely face, but on every lineament of which was expressed the deepest grief.

It was Pauline who now beheld her sister for the first time since the terrible calamity had overtaken the victim of royal lust and perfidy!

The door was opened softly; and the younger Miss Clarendon entered the room alone, the door being immediately closed behind her.

Subduing by a tremendous effort the emotions which struggled to burst forth and which nearly choked her, Pauline laid her hand gently upon Octavia's shoulder. The unfortunate young lady awoke as it were with a sudden start from her profound reverie; and looking up into Pauline's countenance, she gazed long and intently on those features which she had kissed a thousand, thousand times, but which she remembered not now!

"Do you not recollect me, dearest—dearest Octavia?" asked Pauline, in a faint and scarcely audible tone: and she would have thrown herself upon her sister's neck and wept upon her bosom, had she not been emphatically enjoined to abstain from any demonstration of feeling calculated to excite the unfortunate girl.

"Yes—I recollect you," responded Octavia, after a long pause, during which she continued to gaze earnestly up into her sister's face: "you are a good genius who has often visited me in my dreams and kissed me when I was asleep. I am not afraid of you, as I am of other people who present themselves before me. You are the goddess of sweet flowers, and bright sunbeams, and everything joyous and glad; and I have already learnt to love you, though this is the first time that I have seen you save in the visions of the night. But Oh! wherefore do you weep, angel that you are?" cried Octavia, starting to her feet and pressing her sister's hand tenderly.

For the tears rained in torrents down Pauline's cheeks!

"Ah! now I perceive that it is not only mortals who weep," continued Octavia, in a tone of ineffable sadness, which made her sister's tears flow more thickly and fast: "but the good beings who live in heaven can likewise shed those pearly drops. But why do you weep now?—is it for me that you are mournful? Oh! weep on, then—weep on, sweet angel—for I am unhappy—very, very unhappy!"

And, as she spoke, she dropped in a listless manner the hand of her sister, who, now utterly unable to resist the strong current of her emotions, sank upon a chair convulsed with grief.

"This is indeed most singular!" said Octavia, in a musing tone, as her eyes were fixed compassionately upon her sister—that sister whom she did not recognise! "It was but last night I dreamt that you came to see me; and I fancied that you were seized with a sudden and violent sorrow. For methought that you sate down by my bed-side, and took my hand, and began to talk to me upon subjects to which I paid little heed at first but which gradually enticed my attention—and then enthralled it altogether. And it appeared to me that you told me many things which had happened when I was a little child and which I had since forgotten; and so pleasing, so touching, and so truthful was your language, that I imagined myself once more a child—chasing the butterfly through the green fields—with my straw hat hanging half off my head—and

my tiny feet scarcely pressing down the daisies and buttercups over which they glancingly sped. And then you spoke of home—yes, of home—a home that I once had—where kind faces smiled upon me, and kind hands pressed mine, and kind voices murmured God's blessing in my ear; and again were your words so truthful and so striking that I wept at those reminiscences which were thus conjured up. But I have no home now," added Octavia, heaving a profound sigh: "for this odious chamber cannot be called my home. No—no—'tis a prison—a vile prison! Behold the bars at the windows—the iron grating over that fire-place—the padlocks to hold that grating fast—the door of the room always kept locked——Yes, 'tis a prison—a vile prison——Merciful God! 'tis not the home of my childhood——Oh! no—no!"

And having thus become suddenly excited by the unhappy turn which the current of her thoughts took all in a moment, Octavia clasped her hands convulsively, while her countenance, a few moments before completely unruffled, showed by its workings how poignant were the spasms that rent her heart.

"Octavia—Octavia—dearest Octavia!" exclaimed Pauline, unable to restrain her feelings any longer—but clasping her sister to her bosom: "Oh! do you not recognise me?—do you not know me, my beloved Octavia?"

"Ah! what name is that which you have mentioned?" cried the unhappy lady, tearing herself from Pauline's embrace, and speaking in a quick, agitated manner. "Methinks that name is familiar to me——yes—I have heard it before——Oh! breathe it again; for it sounds softly and sweetly upon your lips!"

And the elder sister gazed with a winning tenderness, strangely and painfully commingled with vacancy, upon the countenance of the younger, whose heart was too full to allow her tongue to give utterance to a word.

"Oh! why will you not breathe that name once more?" asked the victim of royal treachery, her voice becoming more melting and touchingly plaintive than ever. "If I could do you a pleasure in so simple and easy a manner, I should not hesitate."

"Nor I—nor I, beloved Octavia!" exclaimed Pauline, almost suffocated with the sobs that rent her breast: "only it drives me mad——"

"Mad!" ejaculated the elder sister, catching up the word which Pauline so unwittingly and so unfortunately let fall: "mad!" repeated Octavia, again becoming fearfully excited: "Oh! all the world are mad save myself! Ha! ha! I laugh merrily—merrily when I think how absurd and ridiculous every living soul renders himself while endeavouring to look wise and sensible! There is an old gentleman with a white head who comes to see me sometimes:—and he puts the silliest questions—makes the most preposterous remarks—and surveys me with the most laughable affectation of sympathy and compassion. Then he fancies himself a doctor and feels my pulse;—and I humour him, poor old gentleman, as well as I can, because I know that he is mad and cannot be held responsible for his actions. At another time an old woman comes to see me; and she is mad also. But she does not know it—she does not even suspect it; and it is by endeavouring to appear sane that she renders herself ridiculous. Poor old thing! I have more than once laughed in her face—but I have been sorry for it afterwards. All sadness, except that which arises from sin, is sacred;—and therefore when I behold the melancholy looks of that gentleman who believes himself a doctor and of this woman who fancies herself a nurse, I ought to be serious. It is wrong of me to laugh: but I cannot always help it. And now, my dear friend—for I do not know your name," continued Octavia, approaching close up to Pauline and gazing upon her countenance with an expression of melancholy interest, though still commingled with that vacancy which denoted reason's aberration,—"and now, my dear friend," she said, sinking her voice to a low and mysterious whisper,—"pardon me if I tell you a truth that may not be altogether welcome—but believe me, my dear friend, when I assure you that you yourself are as mad as any person in the whole world!"

Thus speaking, Octavia turned lightly away; and picking up her paper crown, she proceeded to put it straight—singing the while a plaintive air in a low tone and musing manner.

Several minutes elapsed, during which the unhappy young lady appeared to forget that any one was present in the room: but all this time her sister, with feelings stretched to almost the extreme power of their tension, was standing by and contemplating her.

Presently the door opened gently—and the Duchess of Devonshire made her appearance.

Then Octavia, placing the crown upon her head and grasping the paper sceptre, seated herself on the table once more; and, after surveying her sister and the Duchess with mingled dignity and sternness for nearly a minute, she commanded them to quit her presence.

Pauline would have lingered to converse with Octavia again—to weep over her—to embrace her—and to endeavour to resuscitate fond memories in her mind: but Georgiana, well knowing how terrific were the paroxysms of excitement which seized upon the unfortunate young lady when contradicted or thwarted, dragged rather than led the distressed and weeping Pauline away from the apartment.

And Octavia was left to that solitude which her disordered imagination filled with a thousand phantasms: but though alone in that chamber, she was not friendless nor deserted in the villa—for *there* had Pauline now taken up her abode, by the consent of the really kind and generous-hearted Duchess of Devonshire.

CHAPTER CXIV.

A HUSBAND'S SELF-MARTYRDOM.

FOUR or five days had elapsed since that tremendous scene at the mansion of the Earl of Desborough, which revealed to this nobleman and his wife the astounding fact that the criminal Ramsey was their guest,—a scene which led to the prompt departure of that treacherous individual, and threw the Countess upon a sick bed.

During that interval the Earl had been unremitting in his attentions to Eleanor: hour after hour did he pass by her bed-side—and it was his hand that smoothed her pillow, administered her medicine, and bathed her feverish, throbbing brows.

At first her senses wandered and delirium seized upon her;—and on those occasions the Earl was

careful to exclude the attendants from the room—for he naturally feared lest she should make revelations of a character destructive alike to *his* reputation and *her own*.

But it was not merely to keep a constant watch over her, that the Earl passed long days and held his vigils by the bed-side of the Countess: no—his motives were less selfish and far more estimable;—for he loved that woman who had deceived him—he loved, adored, worshipped her!

And as he gradually beheld the danger passing away—convalescence approaching—and her thoughts settling down into their proper channels, his heart rejoiced and he experienced a happiness greater than any he had long known: for as he contemplated that countenance so eminently handsome, and swept with his looks that form so exquisitely symmetrical as it lay stretched on the couch, the snowy bed-clothes affording indications of the contours of the shape and marking the superb length of limb and all the flowing outlines,—as he thus contemplated the lovely Eleanor, we say, he felt that it would indeed be hard for her to die in the vigour of her years and the meridian of her heart's glowing passions!

Thus was it that this good nobleman who lived only for the sake of that woman whom he adored, and whose happiness he would have gladly consummated by the sacrifice of his own,—thus was it that he watched day and night by her bed-side;—and after her senses had returned, whenever she opened her eyes they encountered the melting, tender, and affectionate looks of that husband whom she had wronged so foully!

But so soon as Eleanor was enabled to collect her thoughts sufficiently to ponder upon everything which had occurred on that memorable day when the thunderbolt fell and burst at her feet,—she began to ask herself over and over again whether she had betrayed the *one* dread secret to her husband. In fact, was he aware that Ramsey had been her paramour?—had she betrayed herself in the ineffable anguish of that moment when the canvass revealed to her the countenance of the criminal?—or did the Earl imagine *then* and *still* believe that her emotions at the time and her subsequent illness were merely the results of a sudden shock very naturally experienced under such painful circumstances?

The longer the Countess reflected upon these matters, the more did she endeavour to persuade herself that her adultery was unsuspected by her husband. But in spite of the assiduousness and the pertinacity with which she endeavoured to reason her mind into this belief, there was a constant terror—an incessant misgiving lurking at the bottom of her soul,—a feeling of uneasiness which she vainly, vainly sought to smother!

When she looked furtively at her husband at moments when he either fancied she was sleeping or when he himself had fallen into a reverie, the suspicion that she read the *worst* in his melancholy pensive features would amount almost to a conviction in her mind: and then she thought she could understand all the forgiving generosity of his behaviour—all the noble-hearted devotion which made him endure everything for *her* sake!

But when they were alone together, a nervous trembling would come over her as she lay on the bed of sickness—and at the first word which on those occasions fell from his lips, she would start convulsively as if some tremendous accusation were about to be made against her. At the same time the colour would come and go upon her cheeks with strange rapidity;—and while at one moment her veins would appear to run with lightning, at another the blood would seem to freeze in its crimson channels.

The Earl soon saw what was passing in her mind;—and, animated by that compassion and that love which influenced all his conduct towards her, he was resolved to put a speedy end to a state of suspense, misgiving, and alarm, so torturing to her whom he adored despite of all she had done outrageous to his dignity as a husband and his feelings as a man.

It was on the fifth morning after the terrific explosion effected by the exhibition of George Woodfall's picture,—and at about the hour of noon, that the Countess of Desborough was permitted by her physicians to rise from her couch for a little while.

Attired in an elegant *deshabillée*, the beauteous patrician lady was now reclining in an arm-chair placed at a short distance from the cheerful fire in her bed-room;—and when the Earl was re-admitted to the chamber and the attendants had withdrawn, he availed himself of this opportunity to make revelations which were perhaps less anticipated by his wife than they are by any one of the two hundred thousand readers of this narrative.

"My dearest Eleanor," he said, "the moment has now arrived when it becomes necessary that we should have some serious conversation together."

"Ah! the dreaded moment!" murmured the Countess in a hurried and agitated under-tone—bounding at the same time upon her chair as if she were suddenly galvanized.

"Do not be alarmed, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor," said the Earl, noticing the convulsive movement, but not hearing the half-agonised, half-despairing expression. "Let me at once and without circumlocution inform you," he added hastily, "that I know everything and that I pardon you!"

"Everything!" murmured the Countess, in a faint and almost dying tone, while her heart experienced such a sinking that it seemed as if the very tide of life itself were rapidly ebbing away.

"Yes — everything!" exclaimed the nobleman. "And now, my dearest—dearest Eleanor—if you will permit me thus to address you——I implore you to be calm and tranquil: for I solemnly and sacredly assure you that my forgiveness is as complete as your error has been great——"

"Oh! yes — great — great indeed!" cried the Countess, bursting into tears; "great—and unpardonable!"

"No — not unpardonable," responded the Earl immediately. "Immense allowances are to be made for you, Eleanor—and I believe—I hope I am too just not to admit the full scope of the extenuation!"

"You cover me with shame and confusion—you make me loathe myself!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, burning blushes now spreading over the cheeks which illness had left so pale. "Oh! you are an example of everything noble-minded, generous, lofty, and good—whereas I am the piteous representative of gross unhallowed passions and of that foul crime against which the Almighty has levelled a special injunction! Yes — yes—for I am an adulteress, Francis—and yet you can pardon me!"

With these words the Countess threw herself at her husband's feet—clasped his knees—and looking up towards him in an appealing manner, she seemed to wait in torturing suspense until another word

from his lips should confirm the forgiveness he had already promised.

"Rise, my Eleanor—rise!" exclaimed the Earl, hastening to lift her from her suppliant posture, and gently compelling her to resume her seat in the arm-chair: then, stooping towards her, he pressed his lips for a moment to her polished brow, murmuring, "Yes, my Eleanor—I do indeed forgive thee! By that kiss I swear that thou art pardoned!"

"Oh! never did so worthless a woman possess so noble-minded a husband!" exclaimed the Countess devoured by shame, remorse, and an ineffable sense of self-loathing.

"Reproach not yourself, my Eleanor," said the Earl: "but listen to all that I am about to tell you—and then perhaps," he continued in a trembling tone, "you will think me worthy of some little amount of love—unless indeed," he added, his voice becoming scarcely audible, "you should despise me altogether."

"No — no — impossible, Francis!" cried the Countess of Desborough. "But, Oh! do you not recollect that scene which occurred between us some few weeks ago — when you explained to me the hopes which animated you and the intentions that you cherished towards me on making me your wife——"

"Yes—yes—I recollect!" interrupted the nobleman. "Oh! not a word that ever passed between you and me, Eleanor, has been forgotten. On that occasion to which you allude I told you that my hope was to gain your esteem and friendship, and my determination was to surround you with the most delicate attentions and unwearied assiduities——"

"And on that same occasion, Francis," cried the Countess, "I acknowledged all that was great, generous, and noble in your conduct—and I assured you solemnly," she added, casting down her eyes and blushing deeply,—"I assured you that I was *then* as pure and chaste a virgin as the infant babe! Yes—despite of the impassioned ardour of my nature—despite of those fervent longings which at times almost maddened me—I was still innocent in body, although perhaps impure in mind and in thoughts. And, Oh! if since that period I have succumbed to temptation — opportunity—the irresistible force of circumstances,—if I have yielded to all these, and have lost my honour as well as *your* confidence and *my own* self-respect—Oh! have pity upon me—have mercy, Francis—for I had struggled long and powerfully—heaven knows how desperate were the efforts which for years I had made to repel temptation and guard mine innocence——"

"I *have* pitied you, my Eleanor," exclaimed the Earl,—"and I *have* pardoned you! Merciful God! all that has happened I have well deserved and should have foreseen! 'Twas I who deserve to be blamed—not you! With the lamentable physical misfortune which rendered me unfit for marriage—well knowing, in fact, that ten thousand sources of misery would eventually be summed up in the terrible word *impotency*—I was a wretch to have induced a young, handsome, and impassioned woman to accompany me to the altar! Oh! as I have before explained the infernal mockery, 'twas binding to the side of a corpse a being in whose veins coursed the rich warm blood of a vigorous youth! But, O Eleanor—Eleanor! I have been tremendously punished—and I have likewise endeavoured to make you an atonement, even though *your* dishonour and *my* infamy were involved therein! Now do you begin to understand any portion of my recent conduct——"

"Yes—yes—oh! yes!" ejaculated the Countess, a light suddenly breaking in upon her brain. "That night which the Prince of Wales passed in this house——"

"Oh! will you not despise me, Eleanor, I again ask?" cried the Earl of Desborough, his tone, his looks, and his manner indicating how deep was the excitement which was growing upon him. "But you shall first hear me—and then answer deliberately," he continued, without affording his wife time to respond to the query just put. "You remember that morning when the Duchess of Devonshire called upon you after her return from Scotland——"

"Great heaven! a thought strikes me," interrupted the Countess, an awful trembling seizing upon her entire frame and making every limb quiver as if with an intense chill. "Yes — that conversation which passed between the Duchess and myself——"

"I overheard it all!" said the nobleman, in a hoarse thick tone.

"And you did not curse me?—you did not invoke heaven's vengeance upon my head!" shrieked forth the wretched Eleanor. "O God! how deeply —deeply I have wronged you, Francis, in so many, many different ways: and yet you have not spurned me from you—you have not thrust me forth as you would the snake which having been warmed at your hearth, uprears its head to sting you!"

"Have I not told you that I love you—that I adore you, Eleanor?" exclaimed the Earl: "and are you not aware that there is no sacrifice which I am unprepared to make in order to ensure your happiness and win some slight portion of your esteem. But let us continue the topic upon which we were entering. You remember, then, all the particulars of that interview, Eleanor, which took place between yourself and the Duchess?"

"To my shame—to my confusion—to my deep, deep sorrow, do I recollect every detail!" said the unhappy patrician lady. "Led on by I know not what fatal current of reflections—impelled by some demon to open my heart upon a subject which should have remained sacred—I revealed the secret to her Grace of Devonshire——"

"Torture not yourself with poignant reproaches on that head," interrupted the Earl, with the mournful calmness of a martyr: "the past cannot be recalled—and it is useless even to deplore it. But on that occasion when yourself and the Duchess of Devonshire were indulging in the mutual outpourings of a secret confidence, the name of the Prince of Wales was mentioned by you both."

"Yes—oh! yes—I remember!" ejaculated the Countess, a new subject for shame now presenting itself to her mind, as the conversation alluded to by her husband flashed vividly to her recollection. "Oh! how can I bear thus to remain in your presence and have all my frailties and failings—my errors and my misdeeds, marshalled in dread array before my eyes!"

"It is not to torture you, Eleanor, that I am prolonging this discourse," said the Earl; "but in order that we may have certain necessary explanations, and that *my* conduct may be appreciated by

you in the proper light. Well, then—to resume the topic, painful though it be—I must remind you that the Duchess of Devonshire revealed to your ears the details of her own seduction by the Prince; and from *your* lips then came the avowal that his Royal Highness had bestowed his smiles upon yourself and had sought to make *you* his victim. After the departure of the Duchess, you came into the adjoining room, where you found me. As you are already aware, I had overheard everything. Oh! the mortal agony of that hour!—ages and ages of bitterness, and woe, and intense suffering were concentrated therein! For you had revealed to the ears of your friend *my* disgrace and *your* misfortune;—and so deep—so crushing—so overwhelming was the humiliation I experienced, that I stretched out my arms to the walls to give way and cover me with their ruins! You may conceive, then, how difficult it was for me to subdue my emotions and assume a tranquil mien when you entered the apartment. No angry feeling did I entertain towards yourself, Eleanor—but the harrowing sense of mortal agony which I endured, arose from the one grand, eternal conviction that I had done you a foul—nay, the foulest wrong, by becoming your husband."

"And yet, Francis," said the Countess, in a faint and trembling tone, "had you killed me when I thus appeared before you, after all you had overheard, I should have merited my fate."

"Holy God—no!" ejaculated the Earl. "Not for worlds would I harm a single hair of your head! But let me continue, Eleanor," he said, in a less excited voice. "During the night which followed that terrible afternoon I never slept a wink. Like another Cain, did I wander to and fro—cursing my own fate—wishing that I was dead—and yet recoiling from the idea of suicide. I reflected upon the wrong I had done you, Eleanor—and I reflected also upon the means of repairing it. By the confession which you had made to the Duchess of Devonshire, I

knew that you were pure and innocent—and I knew also that you were unhappy! Nature had endowed you with strong passions; and it was natural, therefore, that you should seek to appease them. They were devouring you;—and your sense of rectitude was put to a trial as unjust as it was intolerable. My God! how I pitied *you*—how I hated *myself!* *Yours* was a fate beyond all commiseration—mine an iniquity beyond all cursing! I vowed that something should be done: either I would lay violent hands upon myself and thus leave you free to marry another in due time—or I would actually seal my own dishonour by throwing a lover—a seducer—a paramour in your way! Yes—these were the alternatives between which I had to choose!"

"Oh! it covers me with shame—it weighs me down with confusion, to hear you thus unveil your feelings concerning me!" said Eleanor, bending down her head to conceal the blushes that suffused her cheeks—those blushes that overspread even her neck and her bosom!

"Heaven alone knows what a night of torture and misery I passed!" continued the nobleman. "Daylight brought me no relief—and I went forth to wander in the parks in a state of mind enviable only by a wretch about to be hanged. The mendicants who passed me and on whom I bestowed my alms, little thought how cheerfully I would have exchanged conditions with them! In the afternoon I called upon a medical practitioner—a Mr. Thurston residing in May Fair. I promised him largely—but he could give me no hope. I went away distracted. On my return home again, I resolved upon self-destruction. But better feelings sprang up in my mind at the very instant when I was about to place the muzzle of a pistol in my mouth. Then I determined to live—but to adopt that *other* alternative——"

"Oh! this is painful—most painful!" murmured Eleanor, with a faint hysterical shriek: "it is agonising—excruciating!"

"And yet you must hear me to the end," said the Earl, rather in a tone of entreaty than of command. "Well—I resolved, as I observed, upon that *other* alternative whereof I have already spoken;—and remembering that the Prince of Wales had already sought to make you his victim—as you expressed yourself to the Duchess of Devonshire—I determined to afford him the opportunity which he desired. With a suitable excuse I waited upon him;—and his Royal Highness *condescended*," said the Earl bitterly, "to accept a loan of twenty thousand pounds from the man whose wife he sought to seduce. It was to receive this sum that he honoured us with his presence in the evening;—and I was charmed to see that *you* were ravishingly beautiful and that *he* was dazzled and captivated. Yes—I was charmed, I say; inasmuch as the success of my stratagem appeared inevitable! His Royal Highness was easily induced to pass the night at the mansion;—and I felt confident that he would not fail to profit by the incident. You remember that in the drawing-room a dispute arose respecting some particular quotation. I volunteered to fetch the book which would set the question at rest. On my return to the apartment, I saw at a glance that a complete understanding was established between yourself and the Prince: or at least, I fancied that such was the case. You retired—and I was left alone once more with his Royal Highness. Then—Oh! then—a mortal sickness came over me—and I shrank aghast from the thought of my own self-martyrdom! The Prince observed the change which had come over me: but I easily persuaded him that it was a sudden indisposition. A few minutes elapsed in conversation—and we separated. He retired to the apartment prepared for him; and I hastened to my own chamber. Great heavens! what a night did I pass again! I felt that I had crucified myself—that I had planted a crown of thorns upon my own brows—that I had affixed the stigmata upon my own person: lava boiled in my veins—hell raged in my soul—demons scourged my writhing spirit with whips of scorpions and of flame! And yet, as God is my witness, Eleanor—I swear most solemnly that never once—no—not once did a feeling of anger arise in my breast against thee. Though confident that thou wast locked in the arms of a lover——"

"You wrong me, Francis!" ejaculated the Countess, solemnly. "I swear as solemnly as thou hast sworn, that the Prince——"

"I know what you would say, Eleanor—dear Eleanor," interrupted the Earl: "you surrendered not yourself to the arms of the Prince. Oh! this I saw on the following morning—this I understood beyond all possibility of doubt when his Royal Highness came forth from his chamber! And I, who was sinking down into the very dust with humiliation—I, the husband, who had sought to pander to my own dishonour—I who had tutored myself to make every sacrifice of feeling for thy sake,—I perceived at a glance that instead of a night of love and pleasure, the Prince had experienced a bitter mortification and a cruel disappointment. Then—oh! then, an indescribable pleasure seized upon me—and hurrying to my own chamber to conceal my joy, I wept like a child!"

"Merciful heavens! Francis—how acutely have you suffered for the sake of a worthless woman!" exclaimed Eleanor, throwing herself into her husband's arms and lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses. "Oh! how sublime has been your self-devotion—how glorious your self-martyrdom! Every mortal idea of generosity is outdone by this conduct of thine;—and I shall know how to thank thee, my good, kind husband—aye, and likewise to demonstrate a lasting gratitude towards you! Unless, indeed," she cried with hysterical abruptness, as a sudden thought struck her;—and at the same time she snatched herself away from his embrace,—"unless indeed, you loathe—detest—and abhor me, because I saved my honour from a Prince only to surrender it unto a criminal whose image is now as dreadful to contemplate as his presence was once necessary to my happiness!"

And, falling back into her arm-chair, the Countess fixed her frightened—anxious—deprecating looks upon the countenance of her husband.

"Have I not already declared that it is I who must ask your pardon over and over again?" cried the Earl. "But I shall not seek your forgiveness for what may not be forgiven: no—I will endeavour to prove still farther how anxious—how willing I am to make every reparation for the wrong I have done you, Eleanor, by becoming your husband. Listen, then—grant me your patience once more. What I propose is that you should institute a suit against me for cruelty—ill-treatment—and a continued series of cowardly and brutal acts towards you."

"Heavens! what mean you?" demanded the Countess, all the timid entreaty of her manner changing into ineffable amazement.

"I mean that you shall obtain a decree of divorce in the Ecclesiastical Court," responded the Earl of Desborough; "and the more important decree of separation will naturally follow in the House of Lords. To none of the legal steps thus taken shall I offer any opposition. Although the judicial proceedings will brand me as a cowardly ruffian who dared to ill-treat an amiable, excellent, and beautiful woman—yet shall I secretly rejoice at being thus placed under society's ban, inasmuch as *my* self-martyrdom will constitute *your* release from those matrimonial bonds that link you to the side of a corpse! You will be free to marry again——"

"Never!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, once more starting to her feet—and now drawing her fine form as proudly up as if she had not just risen from a sick bed: "never!" she repeated, in a voice which went thrillingly, though musically sweet and clear, to the very soul of her husband. "No, Francis—I am not base enough to avail myself of so much generosity: nor could I consent to the consummation of the tremendous wrong which would result towards yourself. What! consent to have *you* branded as a coward that could ill-treat a woman,—*you* who would sooner die than lift your hand against me—*you* who have never even uttered a harsh word in my hearing—*you* who have sought to make every sacrifice that an unheard-of generosity could possibly prompt! Listen to me, Francis—listen to me," said Eleanor, her voice becoming thick with emotion and her manner growing as decided as that of a heroine of masculine mind,—"I am not altogether insensible to the same feelings which have hitherto governed you only—and henceforth I will endeavour to share them with you. Not that I can ever hope to outvie you in generosity, Francis—because that is impossible: but I may at least render myself more worthy of all your love than I have previously been. Again, then, do I beseech you to listen—to hear me, while I invoke heaven to witness that from this moment forth I will be a good, obedient, dutiful, and loving wife—yes, a loving wife, Francis—and loving, too, with an affection which will burn all the more purely, and brightly, and warmly, because it is kindled by a spark caught from the flame that animates your noble heart!"

"Is this possible, Eleanor—oh! is this possible?" murmured the Earl, faultering in speech and staggering in limbs beneath the sudden weight of an overwhelming happiness. "Ah! wherefore afford me a glimpse of so joyous a paradise, only to make me recoil the more despairingly into a deeper and blacker abyss of despair?"

"Oh! he will not believe me—he has lost all confidence in me!" exclaimed the Countess, joining her hands with an air of poignant wretchedness.

"Believe you!" ejaculated the Earl: "yes—oh! yes—I will believe you——Only, this sudden happiness is too much——"

And, pressing his hand to his brow, he staggered forward—reeled half round—and sank nearly senseless upon a chair.

But ere he fell completely on the carpet, he was caught in the arms of his wife; and the unmistakable fervour with which she bestowed upon him the softest and tenderest caresses, carried to his soul the ecstatic conviction that his own devoted love had indeed engendered a reciprocal sentiment at last in the bosom of the woman whom he adored.

In fact, no words can express the astonishing revolution which a short half-hour had wrought in the feelings of the beauteous Countess towards her husband. His noble self-martyrdom for her sake,—a self-martyrdom involving all the most delicate emotions and the loftiest sentiments that ever concrete in the heart of man,—had inspired her with an admiration of his truly chivalrous character, which amounted to a burning enthusiasm. Instead of appearing contemptible any longer in her eyes, he shone with a god-like lustre to her imagination: instead of seeming an object to be despised and contemned, he had suddenly become invested with every attribute to command respect and ensure an exalted worship.

Chastened, purified, and elevated in every sense by the splendid example of a man who could make the largest sacrifices to the love which he cherished, and who would even have sealed his own dire unhappiness and stamped his own indelible dishonour for the purpose of ministering to his wife's desires,—Oh! who can wonder if Eleanor, herself so intelligent, so sensitive, and so just, should become an altered being under such an influence and when moved by the impulse of so much gratitude, wonder, and admiration!

And to this frame of mind was the Countess of Desborough more easily brought by the fact that her love for Ramsey had been converted into the most ineffable hatred, abhorrence, and loathing: so that she experienced an indescribable relief, amounting to the ecstacy of a pleasure hitherto unknown, in turning away as it were from the memory of an amour so gross and so fraught with shame, to find herself the object of a passion so spiritually pure, so holy, and so æsthetic!

CHAPTER CXV.

LORD AND LADY HOLDERNESS.

It was six o'clock in the evening; and the domestic had just placed the dessert upon the table in the dining-room at the dwelling of Lord Holderness in Cavendish Square.

His lordship was seated with his bride in that apartment, where the thick curtains were drawn over the windows and the soft lustre shed by the lamps was reflected in the decanters filled with yellow, rosy, and dark wines. Upon the board glowed the golden orange and the rich grape of Portugal: dried fruits, sweet-cakes, and the various accessories to a dessert in winter-time likewise appeared in crystal dishes. The fire blazed cheerfully in the grate—and, to outward seeming, naught was wanting to complete the happiness of a man who had just been created a peer and who had taken a lovely young wife unto his bosom.

But he whom we so lately spoke of as Mr. Clarendon, and whom we are now to denominate by the haughty title of Lord Holderness, was not happy—no, far from it! He had obtained a wife who was ravishingly beautiful it was true: but he had lost his daughters, who were more lovely still, and who might have proved his pride and comfort in his old age. The beautiful wife he had not wooed: she had forced herself upon him;—and though but a few

days had elapsed since they were united, he had already been taught to quail beneath her imperious temper and succumb ignominiously to her despotic will. Nor was Pauline there to sooth him:—no—nor his Octavia to comfort him! He felt that he was childless—and the young wife whom he had placed at the head of his household, made not his dwelling a happy home!

During the whole of dinner-time, and while the liveried footmen were present, but little conversation had passed between the noble couple; and those remarks were of a cold and ceremonial nature. It was however evident, as the repast drew towards its termination, that Lady Holderness was becoming impatient of the restraint imposed by the presence of the domestics, and that she longed for the moment to arrive when their departure from the room would enable her to give utterance to the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind.

At length the wished-for instant came;—and as soon as the dessert was placed upon the table, in the manner already described, Fernanda looked significantly at her husband, observing, "It is now necessary that we should discuss our plans and settle the course which we intend to pursue."

"So soon—ere the honeymoon be past?" ejaculated his lordship, evidently anxious to obtain a reprieve in respect to a subject which he viewed with terror and dismay.

"You have already demanded a postponement of this conference more than once—and I have acceded to your solicitation," said Fernanda. "But five days have now elapsed since we were united to each other—and *that* period," she observed, her bright scarlet lips curling with a momentary irony, "is quite sufficient for the honeymoon of a pair who wedded under such unusual auspices and for purposes of so purely a worldly nature."

"But, my dear Fernanda," exclaimed Lord Holderness, "the peerage which I coveted, and to which you were to help me, is gained—yes, gained without your assistance: and therefore I think the least you can do is to allow me to enjoy my honours in tranquillity. For *you* have profited by my good fortune in a manner most unexpected by yourself at the moment when you became my wife."

"If you continue to talk much longer in a style which argues a cowardly, grovelling, indolent disposition," exclaimed Fernanda, her eyes flashing fire and a deep pink hue suddenly rushing to her cheeks, —"you will provoke me to upbraid you with no measured invective. But I propose that we argue the point calmly and deliberately——"

"What point, my love?" demanded his lordship, in as meek, mild, and conciliatory a tone as he could possible adopt in order to lull the gathering storm.

"The point whether you are to fulfil the objects for which we joined our hands and fortunes," responded Fernanda, with a stern emphasis. "You craved a peerage—and I sought vengeance! At that time the removal of Arthur Eaton from this world would have placed you on the threshold of your desires, and would have gratified mine at once. Therefore did we make common cause against that young man—*you* from motives of ambition, and *I* from motives of revenge! Well—it is true that accident has suddenly befriended *you* in a somewhat remarkable manner: for you have acquired your peerage all in a moment——"

"And without perpetrating a crime!" added Lord Holderness, emphatically.

"Ah! coward——But no—I will not taunt you yet," exclaimed Fernanda, at first starting from her seat as if to spring upon her husband with the fury of a tiger-cat—then instantaneously subduing her wrath and recovering all her external tranquillity and composure. "Yes—you have obtained your peerage," she continued, with a corresponding placidity of voice; "but I have not as yet succeeded in making the slightest advance towards the gratification of my vengeance."

"And will you not abandon it, Fernanda—dear Fernanda?" inquired the newly-created peer coaxingly.

"Now can I scarcely repress my feelings—so full of disgust, and indignation, and amazement am I at the question you have dared to put to me!" cried the lady, the sea-shell pink on her damask cheeks suddenly deepening into the liveliest crimson, and the violet blue of her eyes darkening to the intensity of the stormiest black. "Renounce my vengeance?—never!" she exclaimed, in a tone of startling fierceness and electrifying wildness. "Although married to *you*, yet my soul cherishes a deeper hatred than ever towards *him!* Yes—and it was to enable me to consummate my vengeance against Arthur Eaton all the more easily, that I became your wife!"

"But how can I aid you in your schemes, Fernanda?" demanded Lord Holderness: "and what inducement have I to assist you, even if I possess the power? You do not suppose that *I* have any sentiment of vindictiveness to appease?"

"No—but you have ambition to minister unto and avarice to gratify," responded Fernanda, recovering her tranquillity alike of voice and manner.

"Ah! I begin to understand you," murmured Lord Holderness, his wife's observation having touched in his heart the chord which she meant to reach: for if she had allowed five days to elapse ere she compelled him to enter upon the present topic, it was not through any consideration for himself, but merely that she might have leisure to probe every weakness, foible, and failing of his character.

"Listen attentively," resumed Fernanda; "and I shall prove to your satisfaction that the same result which gratifies my vengeance, forwards likewise your interest. In a word, you are still deeply concerned in the necessity of removing Arthur Eaton from our path. For although with your peerage you have obtained a pension, yet is the latter so small that it will not serve to support your rank in a becoming manner. Already do I perceive —within the five days of my sojourn in this house —that we are living at the rate of ten thousand a-year, instead of two! The carriage you set up the very morning after our marriage—the extra servants you engaged at the same time ——"

"Yes—yes—your calculations are accurate, Fernanda," interrupted Lord Holderness. "But why foresee difficulties ——"

"Because we must guard against them," promptly ejaculated her ladyship. "Let Arthur Eaton be once removed from your path, and you instantly become heir to the Marchmont estates, that peerage likewise merging in your own."

"Yes—Baron Holderness and Marchmont," said

the nobleman, in a musing tone and with a gleam of satisfaction stealing over his countenance.

"Then, may not the possessor of two peerages boldly and confidently ask for an Earldom?" cried the temptress, her beauteous features becoming radiant with the triumphant feeling which she assumed as her bright red lips poured the delicious poison into her husband's ears.

"O Fernanda!" exclaimed Lord Holderness; "you have inspired me with thoughts and aspirations which hurry me onward with a force that is irresistible—and you teach me to look upon the hideous aspect of crime as if I had been familiar with it all my life!"

"Be brave—be courageous—be bold, my dear Walter," cried the false syren, rising from her seat and throwing her white arms round her husband's neck. "Come—behave in a manner that will make me love you. When I first revealed my countenance to you the other day, you declared that I was adorable and that you could worship me. Well—give me a proof that you are really gratified by the possession of a young and handsome wife. You see that I am somewhat vain: but then I know that I *am* really beautiful."

"And what proof of my affection do you require?" asked the nobleman, snatching a few kisses, and indulging in certain little toyings provoked by the splendidly white neck and remarkably low dress of his young wife.

"I demand," she said, seating herself upon his knee and placing her lips close to his ear, so that her cheek touched his own and her rich glossy tresses swept his shoulder,—"I demand that you renounce not one tittle of the grand scheme which made us join our hands and our fortunes a few days ago;—and I demand likewise that you place implicit confidence in me, and yield entirely to my guidance in everything which I shall propose respecting Arthur Eaton."

"I promise all you ask, Fernanda," murmured Lord Holderness, bewildered and overcome by mingled feelings of voluptuousness and ambition, and also by the fear of turning this delicious calm into a violent storm.

"You promise that you will not again oppose my views?" she said inquiringly: "and you pledge yourself likewise to second them?"

"Yes, dear Fernanda," was the reply. "But will you really love me if I become thus docile and obedient towards you?—will you make me happy in this world, if I consent to dare eternal misery in the next?"

"Become all that I wish you to be," answered the lady emphatically; "and I will adore you! But if you would indeed acquire my love, Walter—if you would have me devote myself fervidly and enthusiastically to you, and you only—you must hesitate at nothing that I may suggest——"

"I will prove myself a very tiger of ferocity," murmured Lord Holderness, "if you only continue tender, affectionate, and kind as you are now."

And he strained his beautiful wife to his breast.

"The tenderness, the affection, and the kindness which I am now manifesting towards you," said Fernanda, in a soft low tone, "are mere coolness and reserve in comparison with that glowing enthusiasm which I shall testify towards you, if you keep your promise and go hand in hand with me upon the path of crime! Yes—crime, my husband—crime," she repeated, the horrible word sounding strange when wafted to the ear by the witching melody of such a voice: "for crime shall cement our love—crime shall consolidate our affections! By plunging into the abyss of crime to the same depth—so that one shall be as deeply stained as the other,—by ever keeping side by side in this enterprise of darkness and iniquity, so that one shall be neither before nor behind the other,—by establishing, in a word, a perfect equality in our ominous career, we shall reciprocate the same regard—exchange the same amount of attachment—and have our hearts knit together by ties as firm on the one side as on the other. And when we have learnt to love each other in this manner and upon this system," continued Fernanda, her hideous sophistry flowing all the time in strains the most liquid and charming to the ear, as the pearly stream which the enemy has poisoned glides on into the heart of the besieged city,—"then will you find that I am capable of adoring you with an adoration such as woman never bestowed on man before—that I will lavish upon you the tendcrest caresses, even as I will surround you by the most delicate and unwearied attentions—and that whether in the sentiment of love or in the voluptuousness of amorous enjoyment, I will so envelop your mind in blissful fascinations and so instil into your soul a sense of the most ravishing delights, that you shall deem such an amount of bliss cheaply purchased by even the darkest crimes!"

"I am thine—wholly thine, Fernanda," murmured the nobleman, drinking in the poison of the honied words which his wife breathed in his ears, and now experiencing a species of intoxication from the effects of the warm, impassioned, and amorous looks which she tutored herself to cast upon him. "Wert thou a fiend in human shape," added Lord Holderness, enthusiastically, "I would say yea to everything thou mightest demand, even though it were to involve the surrender of my own soul!"

"I see that I shall soon love you far more tenderly than ever I loved Arthur Eaton in the first flush of that glowing passion which was alike my strength and my weakness," said her ladyship, still retaining her seat upon her husband's knee and not only submitting to his toyings, but likewise bestowing upon him frequent caresses in return.

"What—can you possibly love an old man like me so profoundly as you would have me believe?" asked Lord Holderness, an indistinct and very slight suspicion of his wife's sincerity flashing across his brain.

"Old!" she ejaculated, with an indignation so well assumed that it instantly destroyed his misgiving: "you are only a year or two past fifty—in your prime——"

"And you are eighteen, Fernanda!" observed the husband, now gazing with a deep but sensuous fondness upon the truly beautiful countenance of his wife.

"Oh! let us not enter upon these comparisons, my dear Walter," she exclaimed, her red lips and her white teeth shining in delicious contrast as her smile beamed radiantly upon the credulous man whom she was thus bending to her will and enthralling in her Circean meshes. "I must now give you a farther insight into my own position and likewise into my plans. Know, then, my dear husband—and you will start in dismay when I reveal the dread truth to your ears,—that I have committed a crime the

penalty of which is *death*—and that there are three people in the world who are acquainted therewith!"

"Merciful God! is this possible, Fernanda?" exclaimed her husband, shuddering all over and clasping her with convulsive violence in his arms.

"It is possible—and it is true!" returned Lady Holderness. "And now a strange and wondrous mystery is about to be unfolded to you, Walter. For that malady which was silently, noiselessly, and unaccountably carrying Arthur Eaton to the tomb, and from which he has recovered as marvellously and even far more speedily,—that malady, I say, was a slow poisoning—and I was the poisoner!"

"You!" ejaculated the husband of this terrible woman.

"Yes—I! And now do you abhor me, Walter?" she demanded, in a tone so sweet and plaintive in its half-reproachfulness, that it could only be compared to that fragrant zephyr of orient climes which carries perfume to the sense and pestilence to the heart.

"Abhor you! Oh! no—no," exclaimed the infatuated Lord Holderness. "But continue, Fernanda—continue! We are to become criminal together—and our love is to equal the crime which is to cement it! Then, continue, I say—and let me see how far you have gone already, so that I may hasten to emulate you. You observed that three persons were acquainted with your guilt in respect to Arthur Eaton?"

"Yes—three persons, all or any one of whom can therefore give up my life to the hangman at any moment," said Fernanda, with a coolness which was remarkable considering the nature of the communication she was making.

"And those three persons?" demanded her husband. "Who are they?"

"In the first place, there is Arthur Eaton himself," replied Fernanda. "Secondly, there is his valet, William Dudley;—and thirdly, there is an old midwife named Lindley, who sold me the poison."

"And Arthur is aware that you thus sought his life?" exclaimed Lord Holderness, gazing upon Fernanda with mingled amazement and incredulity.

"He discovered the secret of his malady," she answered, in a tone that convinced her husband she was speaking the truth: "and by the same means that he found out the bane did he arrive at the antidote."

"Then how know you, Fernanda," exclaimed the nobleman, becoming suddenly and seriously alarmed,—"how know you that he has not communicated the secret to others? Perhaps his father, Lord Marchmont—or your relatives, the Earl and Countess of Desborough—or Lord Montgomery, your cousin——"

"Tranquillise yourself on that head," interrupted Fernanda. "Not one of all those whom you have mentioned, ever dreams of such a thing. Arthur Eaton has kept the secret—religiously and faithfully kept it: nay, more—he has pardoned William Dudley, and, as you are doubtless aware, still retains the man in his service."

"But such generosity as this——" began Lord Holderness.

"Is not sufficient to turn me from my purpose," remarked Fernanda, with an abruptness that overawed her husband in a moment and hushed the remonstrance that was still trembling upon his tongue. "You have now heard a secret which makes you aware of my real position. At the hands of Arthur Eaton I fear little—if anything at all—as matters stand at present: but his valet and the old woman might, in a moment of inadvertency—or under the influence of a death-bed repentance—compromise me cruelly."

"Yes—I perceive that you are fully and completely in their power, my poor Fernanda," said Lord Holderness. "But what do you propose to do?—where is the remedy? Tell me, my beloved wife," he continued, still toying with her—still receiving her caresses in return,—"tell me what you would suggest and how I can help you."

"It is serious—is it not?" observed Fernanda, inquiringly

"Yes—far too serious not to require immediate attention," answered the infatuated noble. "But what do you propose in respect to that valet and the midwife?"

"To place a seal upon their lips for ever?" rejoined her ladyship, solemnly.

"Ah!" ejaculated her husband, with a convulsive start. "And that seal——"

"The silence of death!" added Fernanda, in a deep tone—as if her heart were a cavern and the voice came from the profundity thereof.

"Two murders!" said Lord Holderness, straining her convulsively to his breast. "Oh! Fernanda, Fernanda—I shall be blest by thy love on earth—but through thee shall I be accurst hereafter!"

"The present suffices for our thought, because we know that it exists," exclaimed the terrible young woman whom he had thus feelingly apostrophised: "but all that regards the future is vague—dim—uncertain—doubtful. We feel that we exist now—but we are not sure that we shall exist hereafter!"

"O Fernanda! let us not add the crime of infidelity to the catalogue of guilt already perpetrated or about to be committed!" cried the nobleman, now shuddering more violently than at first. "Ask me to peril my soul—and I will do it: but ask me not to deny that I have a soul thus to endanger!"

"I will not again shock your prejudices, my dear husband," said Lady Holderness, with a slight accent of irony in her tone, soft and melting though her voice continued to be. "But you perceive, Walter—you perceive, I repeat, that to ensure my safety, William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley must die!"

"Yes—they must die!" echoed the nobleman, pressing his quivering lips to those cheeks that were now flushing with a feverish excitement.

"And in the death of *one*," said Fernanda, with a terrible light flashing in her eyes, "shall my vengeance begin against Arthur Eaton!"

"I do not understand you," observed her husband. "That one to whom you allude——"

"Is William Dudley," she replied.

"And how will *his* death forward your design in respect to Eaton?" asked Lord Holderness.

"You shall see, Walter—you shall see!" exclaimed Fernanda, her countenance becoming animated with the glow of a fierce and savage triumph. "We will drink some champagne together—and then, while our blood appears to run like lightning in our veins, I will unfold to you all my schemes—all my projects. And, oh! be assured, Walter,

that my vengeance against Arthur Eaton shall be terrible—very terrible!"

"When do you purpose to take the first step towards the execution of all this?" inquired the nobleman.

"To-morrow, Walter—to-morrow!" was the emphatic response.

"To-morrow!—so soon?" he cried.

"Yes—to-morrow," rejoined Fernanda. "And now I shall surprise you by stating that the preliminary step is for us to call at Lord Marchmont's mansion in Hanover Square."

"But we know that his lordship is out of town at this moment," exclaimed the newly-created peer: "and surely you do not wish to see his son—Arthur Eaton—the object of your bitter hatred and burning vengeance?"

"It is precisely because Lord Marchmont *is* absent from home," said Fernanda, "and because we shall be received by Arthur Eaton only, in his father's absence,—it is precisely for these reasons, I repeat, that we must call in Hanover Square to-morrow."

"And you intend to court this interview with him whom you regard as your mortal enemy?" exclaimed Lord Holderness, gazing upon his wife in mingled surprise and alarm. "Surely you do not contemplate a sudden and open act of violence against him?"

"Oh! do not imagine that I am so insane—so insensate!" ejaculated Fernanda. "No, Walter—it is to make my peace with Arthur Eaton—to assure him of my forgiveness—to demand *his* pardon likewise—and to propose a sincere friendship for the future,—it is for all these purposes that I shall seek an interview with him to-morrow!"

"Incomprehensible woman—what do you mean?" cried her husband, now utterly bewildered.

"I mean to render my vengeance the more certain and my own safety the more secure!" was the deep-toned, subdued, and significant reply. "But now let us ring for champagne, my dear Walter," she cried, starting from his knees and resuming her seat: "and then—while the blood boils in our veins and excess of rapturous feelings enables us to contemplate crime with indifference,—*then*, my lion-hearted Walter, will I—your tiger-cat—unfold my projects to your ears!"

And Lord Holderness rang the bell for the exhilarating juice of Epernay;—and then his eyes remained fixed with mingled delight, and awe, and terror upon that countenance whose ravishing beauty so strangely belied the aspect of the hidden soul—and he felt indeed that he had taken unto his bosom the most dangerous of serpents with the loveliest of skins!

CHAPTER CXVI.

PHILANTHROPY.—THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE PLOT.

By referring to the fiftieth chapter in this narrative, the reader will find that when the Hon. Arthur Eaton manifested so remarkable a forbearance and so unparalleled a generosity towards William Dudley, whom he had detected in the very act of entering his room for a murderous purpose, he received from the penitent valet all the ill-gotten gains acquired by his subserviency to the criminal views of that tigress-woman Fernanda. On the occasion thus alluded to, Mr. Eaton had said to Dudley, "For the present I will take charge of those wages of iniquity: to-morrow I will tell you how they shall be employed! Retire to your own chamber—and fear not that I shall treat you with severity. No—it is my purpose to afford you every opportunity of making your peace with heaven and becoming an useful member of society."

And what was the project which the philanthropic young gentleman had in view?

The case of his own repentant servant made him reflect upon the fact that many and many a sinner may be rescued from the paths of iniquity and redeemed from utter perdition, if instead of being hunted to desperation as an outcast of society, the genial influence of kind treatment and reformatory measures be adopted. For he felt that had he thrust William Dudley forth into the world, penniless, friendless, and characterless, the man must have perforce continued in the career of turpitude in order to obtain a meal and a bed. But saved from this deplorable catastrophe, the chances were ninety-nine to one that he would thenceforth shun vice on account of the perils to which it leads, and embrace virtue for its own sake.

These reflections led the Hon. Arthur Eaton to a more comprehensive consideration of the subject;—and it struck him that if some means of reformation and redemption were applied to those unhappy wretches who, under the influence of pinching penury, have committed a first offence, a large proportion might be rescued from total ruin and reclaimed as honest members of society. For he asked himself how it was possible that the miserable youth or the desperate man, when sent adrift from a felons' gaol at the expiration of the term of imprisonment, could strike into the path of rectitude—turn at once to honest toil—and eat the bread of a meritorious industry! No—it was impossible! From the prison-gates do those beings come forth as destitute as when they committed the crime which sent them thither—clothed in rags—friendless—with the brand of Cain upon their brows—and compelled to feel all the anguish, misery, and pinching want inseparable to their outcast state, with the only alternative of thieving again to amend it! For the tyrannical Government and the barbarian laws of this oppressed and wretched country, have studied only how to punish, persecute, crush, scourge, and trample down—but never to save, reclaim, rescue, and raise up. There are ten thousand enactments by which a poor man may be hanged, transported, or imprisoned—but not one by which he may have the slightest chance of being reformed. So much for the *blessings* of monarchical and aristocratic institutions!

From all this it appeared to Arthur Eaton that an establishment should be founded for the reception and temporary employment of those misdemeanants and felons whom the gaol is daily vomiting back again into that society which discards them as outcasts,—an establishment where these friendless wretches might have immediate work given them, in return for which they would receive food and lodging until a sufficient period elapsed to test the sincerity of their penitence and place them in that frame of mind when some humane masters and employers might no longer hesitate to admit them on their land or in their workshops.

Acting upon these philanthropic views, the Hon. Arthur Eaton lost no time in purchasing a considerable piece of ground in the district which is now known as Pentonville, but which consisted of open fields at the period whereof we are writing;—and on that tract did he speedily set bricklayers and carpenters to work to raise a convenient and spacious building for the object which he had in contemplation. The "wages of crime" surrendered up by William Dudley, went a considerable way towards the purchase of the land; and the valet was rejoiced when his master unfolded to him the use to which it was to be appropriated.

It was moreover resolved by Mr. Eaton that his penitent valet should be the superintendent of the institution when the edifice was completed.

As he did not wish either to obtrude his humane designs upon the public notice, or to incur the annoyance of having his scheme made the topic of endless, varied, and conflicting speculations before its efficacy had even been put to the test, he shrouded the real objects of the building in as much secrecy as possible: but he encouraged the operatives to use the utmost despatch in raising the structure—and thus, in the course of a few weeks, considerable progress had been made.

During that interval, Arthur Eaton had seldom missed a day in visiting the scene of his intended experiment;—and very frequently of an evening, when the bricklayers had left off work, would he repair thither with William Dudley, and explain by the light of a lantern the objects of the various architectural arrangements which were thus rapidly developing their features as the several partitions rose within the circuit of the outer walls.

We have now given a rapid sketch of the aims and pursuits that occupied the Hon. Arthur Eaton during the period which had elapsed since that memorable night when he frustrated the murderous purpose that took William Dudley and Fernanda to his bed-chamber.

But was Fernanda a stranger to these pursuits? No: far from it. In various disguises had she watched Eaton's movements from time to time; and more than once had she overheard, when concealed in the building, the explanations which he gave to William Dudley. The young gentleman's philanthropy she looked upon as the most sickly sentimentalism; and the valet's deep contrition she regarded as a maudlin sanctimoniousness. Towards the former she continued to entertain the fiercest hatred: towards the latter she had conceived the most profound disgust. She likewise considered Dudley as a traitor to her cause;—and thus, while nourishing schemes of diabolical vengeance against the master, she worked herself up to a pitch of rancorous excitement against the man.

Having placed upon record the preceding observations, we now resume the thread of our narrative,—only requesting the reader to bear in mind the discourse which took place between Lord and Lady Holderness, as related in the preceding chapter.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the scene just alluded to, that the newly-created peer and his lovely bride alighted from their carriage at the door of Lord Marchmont's mansion in Hanover Square. We have already intimated that the noble owner of that sumptuous abode was temporarily absent on a visit to his country-seat;—and of this fact Lord and Lady Holderness were not only aware—but they had availed themselves of the opportunity to carry out the nefarious and deeply-ramified scheme which they now had in hand.

The Hon. Arthur Eaton was in the library when a footman entered to inform him that Lord and Lady Holderness were in the drawing-room. A glow of indescribable pleasure sprang up on the countenance of the young gentleman: for, judging others by his own generous disposition, it instantly struck him that Fernanda, having now married and settled in life, had repented of her former bitter hostility towards him and was desirous of making her peace.

To the drawing-room did he accordingly hasten;—and the hope which he had so promptly entertained, appeared to receive instantaneous and full confirmation from the air of frank cordiality and graceful affability with which Fernanda proffered him her hand. At the same time she darted upon him a look which seemed to say, "All is forgotten—let all be forgiven!"

Eaton did not of course entertain the slightest idea that Lord Holderness was aware of the peculiar nature of the intimacy which had once subsisted between Fernanda and himself: he could not possibly suppose that the young lady had revealed to her husband the loss of her chastity previously to her marriage with him;—nor did he behold in this union of his relative and his late mistress anything menacing towards himself—much less a league so formidable as that tremendous alliance of interests the most selfish and vengeance the most implacable which had in reality taken place.

It was therefore with the ease and respectful courtesy of a polished gentleman that Arthur Eaton congratulated Lady Holderness upon her marriage: and, turning towards her husband, he said, "I now have the pleasure of renewing to your lordship in words those felicitations which I have already conveyed in writing, upon your elevation to the peerage."

"I thank you, my dear Arthur," returned the nobleman, "for the letter which I received from you on the subject. I regret that your father is not at home that I might have the opportunity of expressing my gratitude towards him for his recent kindness towards me. But in surrendering the pension which he condescended to allow me," continued Lord Holderness, his tone and manner acquiring a certain degree of hauteur,—"that pension which he lately augmented so considerably,—I am bound to testify in writing the deep sense that I entertain——"

"Surely, my dear Lord Holderness," interrupted Arthur, "this is not the most suitable time to converse upon matters of business?"

"It is precisely that I may feel the true independence of sincere friendship," exclaimed the nobleman,—"that I am anxious to throw off as much as possible, and likewise as soon as may be convenient, the weight of obligation which presses upon me. This relief will my mind experience so soon as I shall have written a few words to your father. Will you oblige me with writing-materials, Arthur?"

"If your lordship be determined to make this visit one of business as well as of friendship," said the young gentleman, "I cannot resist your purpose any farther. I will therefore ring for my writing-desk——"

"Or stay!" interrupted Lord Holderness. "I will not give you so much trouble—and moreover, I would rather be alone for a few minutes while

penning the letter. Allow me, therefore, to retire to the library. I know the way——There! do not think of accompanying me any farther——"

And, gently pushing Arthur back, as the young gentleman courteously opened the door for him, Lord Holderness hurried from the apartment.

The moment the door closed behind him, the Hon. Mr. Eaton accosted Fernanda; and in a voice of deep feeling, he said, "I thank you sincerely—thank you from the very bottom of my heart for having signified by your presence here this afternoon that the past is forgotten and forgiven! The instant that I received intelligence of your marriage the other day, I longed to call—to pay my respects—to offer my congratulations—and to express a hope that henceforth we should be friends. But I was afraid——"

"You fancied that I was too vindictive ever to relent?" observed Fernanda, smiling so sweetly—so benignantly—and with such a bland expression of Christian feeling, that no human being, however intimately acquainted with her character, would have suspected for a moment that this heavenly wreathing of her lips was assumed as easily as she could put on any other appearance of hypocrisy and guile. "But since the past is forgiven," she continued, with a corresponding softness of tone, "let it also be forgotten. And now, Arthur—once more I proffer you my hand—the hand of sincere friendship."

"And once more I take it with gratitude and press it with cordial warmth," said the young gentleman, completely deceived by the words, and manner, and bearing of that lovely creature who carried the art of duplicity to a degree of such exquisite refinement.

The conversation between Arthur Eaton and Lady Holderness was then continued in a friendly strain, but upon general and indifferent topics: until the young gentleman suddenly observed, "By the bye, I have been grieved to hear that your noble relative, the Countess of Desborough, has suffered a very severe illness."

"She is convalescent now," said Fernanda.

"And the two Misses Clarendon are staying, I believe, at the beautiful little villa belonging to the Duchess of Devonshire near Aylesbury?" observed Eaton, in an interrogative tone. "At least, so I learnt a day or two ago."

"Yes—such is the case," responded Fernanda. "The Duchess has taken a great fancy to them."

In this manner was the discourse continued for nearly twenty minutes: but in the meantime how was Lord Holderness employed?

The reader has seen how artfully he contrived to get away from the presence of Mr. Eaton in the drawing-room, and thence escape to the library: but he had in view some project of far greater importance than the mere desire to pen a letter to Lord Marchmont. For the sake of appearances, however, he did write an epistle to that nobleman in the sense to which he had alluded: and as soon as he had sealed and addressed it, he stole forth from the library.

No one was in the corridor—and unobserved he ascended the staircase. Fernanda had already tutored him so well, that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in finding his way to Arthur Eaton's bed-chamber, which he boldly entered.

He was prepared for all eventualities. If any one were in that room, his answer was ready:—"he had been inspecting certain books in the library—the dust had soiled his hands—and he knew that he might take such a liberty as to seek his friend Mr. Eaton's apartment in order to wash them." Such was the apology which he had at the tip of his tongue, ready to offer in case of need: but the lie was not wanted—he encountered no one either on his way to the chamber, or in the room itself.

And in that room he did not remain a minute. What he did there, we need not at present disclose: suffice it to say that he succeeded in accomplishing the purpose which he had in view—and, chuckling inwardly, he hastened back to the library. There he remained for a short time, in order to recover a mien of perfect composure; and at length he returned to the drawing-room, where he found his wife and Arthur Eaton conversing as agreeably as if there had never been any misunderstanding between them.

Lord Holderness gave the letter which he had written into the hands of the young gentleman, with a request that it should be presented to Lord Marchmont on the return of that nobleman;—and Eaton promised not to neglect the matter, although he again expressed his regret that so much importance should have been attached to it on the occasion of a friendly visit.

The newly-created peer and Fernanda then took a most cordial and affectionate leave of the Hon. Mr. Eaton; and, returning to their carriage, they were speedily whirled away to Hyde Park, in which fashionable resort they drove until five o'clock.

At this hour they were borne back to Cavendish Square to dinner;—and when they once more found themselves alone over the dessert, Fernanda lavished the most seductive caresses upon her husband—declaring that he had acquitted himself admirably that afternoon, and assuring him that he was already the object of a love which would speedily expand into the enthusiasm of a boundless worship.

The time passed rapidly away until nine—at which hour Fernanda said, "We must now depart upon the business which we have in hand for to-night."

"I am at your orders, dearest," cried Lord Holderness; and he rang the bell for his hat and cloak, while Fernanda hastened up-stairs to put on a shawl and a black hood such as ladies wore in those times when going out of an evening.

"Has your lordship ordered the carriage?" inquired the footman who answered the bell.

"No," was the response. "Her ladyship and myself are merely going to visit some friends a few doors off—and as the night is perfectly dry and very mild, it is not worth while to have the carriage for so short a distance."

At this moment Lady Holderness returned to the dining-room, wearing an ample shawl and a black silk hood;—and, her husband giving her his arm, they sallied forth together.

But instead of repairing to the house of any friends in the neighbourhood, they hastened to the nearest hackney-coach stand; and, entering one of the vehicles, they ordered the driver to take them to the immediate vicinage of the Archbishop's palace in Lambeth. Half-an-hour's ride brought them to the end of their journey; when they alighted—dismissed the coach—and repaired straight to Fore Street.

On reaching the house of Mrs. Lindley, Lady Holderness knocked gently—and the door was immediately opened by the midwife herself. She carried a candle in her hand; and the moment the light beamed on the well-known countenance of the fair patrician, as she partially threw back the hood which she wore, the old woman gave her a respectful welcome. Fernanda then entered the parlour, followed by her husband.

That room was unchanged in its aspect since Fernanda last saw it. The shutters were hermetically closed inside the casements—the white blinds were down—the dark stuff curtains were drawn. The massive walnut-wood furniture was as funereal as ever in its ebon darkness: the pictures in their black frames imparted the same unvaried gloom to the chamber. There, too, was the old dame's easy-chair with its high back;—a good sea-coal fire was blazing in the grate, its lambent flames playing up the wide-mouthed chimney;—and, behold! there was another black cat, lazily opening its sparkling, glass-like green eyes, as it lay rolled up on the hearth-rug,—yes, *another* cat to replace the one which Fernanda had poisoned.

The midwife courteously besought her visitors to be seated: then, depositing herself in the easy-chair, she put on her great horn spectacles with the large round glasses—and her reptile-like eyes glanced inquiringly towards Lord Holderness.

"I see that you more than half suspect that this is my husband, dear Mrs. Lindley," said Fernanda, observing the significant look; "and you are right. He is aware that I passed some time in your establishment—and the manner in which I have spoken of you has induced him to become your patron."

"Hush, my dear lady—not so loud!" whispered the midwife, placing her long, thin, parchment-like forefinger to her lip: "the very walls have ears, you know! But I congratulate your ladyship upon your marriage: I saw it mentioned in the newspaper—and I was pleased to think you were so comfortably settled."

"Let us proceed to business, madam, if you please," said Lord Holderness: "for her ladyship and myself have not much time to spare."

"To business, then, my lord," observed the midwife."

"I will explain the matter as concisely as pos-

sible," said Fernanda. "His lordship has a niece—a young, charming, and beautiful girl—nobly born too—who is in a way to become a mother—and whose shame would redound upon a family with a reputation as yet unsullied. This unfortunate young creature, Mrs. Lindley, will be placed under your charge to-morrow night. But she must be introduced hither with the utmost secrecy——"

"Yes — yes — I understand," whispered Mrs. Lindley. "You need scarcely give me such precise instructions upon that head. If your ladyship will name the hour at which I may expect my new patient to-morrow night, I shall be prepared to receive her."

"We will say at eleven o'clock punctually," answered Lady Holderness. "And now let me impress upon you that the utmost precaution is to be adopted. Your servants will be all in their own rooms — the lodgers in the house will all have retired to rest—and you alone, Mrs. Lindley—remember, I say, *you* alone will be sitting up to receive the unhappy young lady whom Lord Holderness will himself escort hither at the appointed hour."

"Everything your ladyship has suggested, shall be strictly attended to," said Mrs. Lindley. "I suppose I am to understand that not even my confidential servant is to see the young lady during her sojourn in my house? I am to attend upon her myself?"

"Precisely so," answered Fernanda: "and your recompense shall be most liberal."

"Oh! that assurance is quite unnecessary from your ladyship," said the midwife. "But do you not inquire after your friend Caroline Walters?" she asked, as Fernanda rose to depart.

"Ah! I had forgotten her!" ejaculated Lady Holderness. "Is the poor girl still here?"

"Yes—but she will leave me very shortly, I believe," responded Mrs. Lindley. "Would your ladyship like to see her? She often and often speaks of you——"

"Speaks of me!" repeated Fernanda. "How?—does she know who I am?"

"No—no—heaven forbid!" cried Mrs. Lindley. "But hush!—we are both talking too loud—and walls have ears! What I meant was that poor Caroline Walters speaks of *the young lady*, as she calls you—and she wonders whether you have entirely forgotten her."

"I will come and see her in a few days—when I pay a visit to my husband's unfortunate relative," observed Fernanda. "But in the meantime do not tell Caroline Walters that you have either seen or heard anything of me."

"Your ladyship is well aware that secrecy is the very life and soul of my profession," returned the old midwife, gently repulsing the huge black cat which at the moment leapt into her lap. "But will your ladyship take some refreshment?—or his lordship? A glass of wine and a biscuit——"

"Nothing, I thank you," said the nobleman, drawing his cloak around him. "To-morrow night, as the clock strikes eleven, shall I be here—with my niece."

"To-morrow night—at eleven punctually," answered Mrs. Lindley.

Lord and Lady Holderness then took their departure.

CHAPTER CXVII.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

Not many minutes had elapsed after Fernanda and her husband had taken their leave of the midwife, when a hackney-coach stopped at the door of the sinister-looking establishment; and Mrs. Brace alighted. She was received by Mrs. Lindley on the threshold, and instantly conducted to the warm parlour, where she did not refuse the refreshment which had already been offered to Lord and Lady Holderness.

"I have come to see you this evening, my dear friend," said the handsome and robust milliner, as she sipped her wine, "because I wished to have Caroline Walters disposed of in some manner or another before I bring Rachel Forrester over to you. Rachel must come in a few days—and I do not like the idea of any two of my girls getting together under such circumstances. They are apt to compare notes and then persuade each other that they have been ill-used."

"Precisely so," observed Mrs. Lindley, who was also indulging in some wine, which made her reptile eyes gleam with an ominous light through the large circular glasses. "This Caroline Walters, especially, is a girl of remarkable spirit and strange character——"

"She who was so docile at first," cried Mrs. Brace, —"and so thankful for everything that was done for her."

"Ah! but in such a place as this," observed Mrs. Lindley, bending forward and speaking with a mysterious air and low whisper, "young women are apt to get ruminating upon their position — and then they fancy that they have been wronged ——"

"Besides," added Mrs. Brace, "Caroline is half a Spaniard, and may therefore be headstrong, vindictive, and unforgiving, when once her spirit is aroused and her mind is bent upon a particular object. However, we must either coax her into compliance with my views—or else we must use coercion. Perhaps you will have the kindness to summon her?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Lindley; and she quitted the room.

In a few minutes she returned, accompanied by Caroline Walters.

The young girl—poor creature, she was but sixteen!—seemed pale and care-worn. The natural brunette richness of her complexion had yielded to a certain sallowness which indicated recent bodily suffering as well as a mind ill at ease; and there was a darkness, arising from the same causes, around her fine black eyes. Her raven hair, so luxuriant in quantity and so silky in quality, was thrust negligently behind her ears and fastened in a slovenly knot at the back of her head;—and there was no longer in her dress that neatness and precision which had once distinguished her plain though becoming garb. In fact, the aspect of the young girl denoted that the sentiment of personal vanity had been absorbed in deeper and sterner emotions.

She did not hasten towards Mrs. Brace as if she still looked on the milliner as a benefactress: but with a sullen slowness of step and a sinister moodiness of manner, she accosted her, saying, "I am glad you have come at last, madam—as I am wearied of being retained a prisoner here."

"A prisoner!" repeated Mrs. Lindley, holding up her hands with well affected amazement: "what does the dear child mean? Surely the doors have not been barred against her?—surely she has never been locked up in her own room?"

"No," exclaimed Caroline bitterly: "persecution and tyranny have not gone quite so far! But——"

"Hush, my dear child—hush!" said the midwife: "remember that the very walls have ears——"

"And it may be that they will one day find *tongues!*" returned Caroline Walters, darting a glance of ominous and dire significancy first upon Mrs. Lindley, and then upon Mrs. Brace.

"What does the girl mean?" exclaimed the latter. "My dear Caroline," she continued, assuming a tone of conciliation and tenderness, "you are sadly altered towards me. How have I offended you?—what have I done to deserve this coldness—this ingratitude—this contempt?"

"What have you done, madam, to deserve any better feelings on my part?" demanded the young girl, now fixing her large black eyes upon the milliner's countenance as if her fiery looks could pierce that lady through and through. "Oh! madam," continued Miss Walters, in a tone thrillingly wild and bitterly reproachful, "I have learnt to view things in a very different light from that in which I formerly beheld them! I now know who it was that literally sold me to the seducer—the base seducer—the nobly-born villain who wooed me with guile, won my honour with treachery, and discarded me with a corresponding heartlessness! Yes, madam—I can see through it all—all;—and I curse—aye, curse my own folly when I think that there was a time at which I believed that he really loved me! Well—what am I living for?—I who am so thoroughly unhappy—so irremediably miserable? Hope is gone—love is dead—every kind feeling is withered in my bosom: but another flame burns *there*, in the place of those lost sentiments—a flame as terrible as if it were a tongue of fire snatched from the raging furnaces of hell!"

"Almighty God! talk not in this horrible manner," cried Mrs. Brace, clasping her hands and growing pale with a real and unfeigned terror.

"Hush!—I command you to be silent—the walls have ears!" exclaimed Mrs. Lindley, gesticulating fiercely at Caroline Walters. "I implore—I beseech you to tranquillise yourself, my dear child," she added, in a more soothing tone. "You said you were a prisoner here: but I hope that you will withdraw that averment. Come, my dear love," she said more coaxingly still; "do me the justice to admit——"

"I will do *myself* and *you* the justice to tell the truth," interrupted the young girl, in a cold, stern, and implacable voice. "That the doors have not been barred against me, I acknowledge—that I might have quitted your dwelling at any moment, Mrs. Lindley, I frankly confess. But though no actual violence has been perpetrated against my liberty—yet am I retained captive by a moral thraldom equally effective and not the less heartless. For the apparel in which I could alone go forth has been hidden—and the little money I possessed has been taken away. Penniless, and without bonnet or cloak, I could not cross the threshold of your house—and you know it! To all intents and purposes, then, am I a prisoner here: and now I demand my release!"

"It was to consult with you, my dear Carry, upon your future plans and prospects," said Mrs. Brace, "that I came hither this evening. Pray do not excite yourself in this fearful manner: all that has been done was for your good—and the little restraint of which you complain——"

"Well, well—take your own view of the affair, madam," interrupted Caroline, sullenly: "only be quick and order Mrs. Lindley to give me my clothes and my money—and within a very few minutes I shall cease to be a charge to either of you any longer!"

"Then you will compel me to speak severely," said the milliner, her cheeks now flushing with indignation. "The fact is, Caroline Walters, that I stand in the light of a parent towards you——"

"Yes—a parent indeed!" observed the girl, with a deep, rancorous, malignant bitterness of tone and a ferocious wildness of look. "You prostituted me for gold——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, rising from her seat all quivering with rage.

"Hush—I command—I implore you!" murmured the midwife. "The very walls have ears——"

"Pardon me for speaking too loudly, my good friend," said Mrs. Brace; "but we shall close this interview in a moment. Miss Walters," she continued, turning towards the young girl, "you may vent your spite—your rage—your hatred upon me to your heart's content: but I have a duty to perform towards you—and that duty shall be accomplished. Ungrateful young woman that you are, you now endeavour to lay your own frailty and immodesty at my door; and you dare to impugn my character——"

"Character, forsooth!" exclaimed Caroline, with an irony alike of tone and manner, the keenness whereof made the brazen-faced woman wince visibly. "Oh! who dares speak of character now? Look at your establishment, madam—a nest of refined, elegant, and smooth-spoken prostitutes! Look at yourself, madam—a religious, church-going, alms-giving procuress!"

"Wretch—I will tear your very eyes out!" screamed Mrs. Brace, her cheeks becoming purple and the veins on her forehead swelling as if they were ready to burst: for the young girl's taunts, though words in seeming, were daggers in sooth.

"Silence—in the name of God, silence!" said Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of abject entreaty. "You will alarm the house—the neighbourhood——"

"No—no—we will put an end to this scene at once," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "Now listen attentively, Miss Walters," she continued, assuming an imperious manner as a last effort to overawe the young girl whose conduct both alarmed and surprised her. "Do you know how stands the law with regard to us? I claim you as my apprentice—and I exact from you the obedience which you owe to one who stands in the light of a parent. Refuse me that obedience—and a magistrate will very speedily teach you what are *my* rights and *your* duties. Nay, more," added the milliner, becoming bolder as she perceived—or fancied she perceived that her words were producing the desired effect upon Caroline Walters,—"that same magistrate, if appealed to by me, will punish you for your past frailty—and there is no doubt that six weeks at Bridewell would curb your haughty and rebellious spirit into the proper compass. Now do we begin to understand each

other?" demanded Mrs. Brace in a tone of undisguised triumph as she beheld her victim cowering beneath menaces which appeared feasible enough to an inexperienced mind.

The poor girl—for a moment crushed and overwhelmed as well by fear of the threatened terrors of the law as by the consciousness of her own unfriended, orphan, and lonely position in the world—turned her affrighted looks from the flushed and angry countenance of Mrs. Brace and bent them upon the midwife, as if imploring sympathy even in that quarter. But the old hag, who had resumed her easy-chair the instant she saw that the milliner was triumphant, and who now sate in cold stern dignity, like an abbess of a rigid Order,—this old hag, we say, fixed on the young girl those reptile-like eyes that now appeared to dilate through their circular glasses, and to gleam with a ghastly and malignant expression which froze the blood in her veins and made her heart feel like ice.

Completely fascinated as it were by that undefinable hideousness of attraction—that species of awful mesmeric influence which the old woman exercised at the moment over the young girl—the latter had no power to withdraw her looks from this dread, unnatural gaze: and when, at the expiration of nearly a minute, the midwife arose slowly from her seat and with her cold, thin, sallow fingers grasped the fair, plump, warm hand of Caroline Walters, the young creature shuddered as if a snake were beginning to envelop her in its folds.

Still was she so spell-bound that she gave not utterance to a word;—and, under the influence of this tremendous fascination, she suffered the midwife to conduct her away from the room. Lamb-like and unresistingly, but swayed by a cold and seemingly mortal terror, Caroline Walters was thus led up-stairs to her own chamber: but when the door was closed upon her and she heard the key grating in the lock, the unnatural spell was suddenly lifted from off her—her senses were unchained in a moment—her blood began to boil and her brain to ferment with all the vitality of a terrible indignation—and, dashing her hand violently against her forehead, she sank upon her knees by the side of her couch, murmuring, "Vengeance! vengeance!"

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE PRINCE OF WALES AND THE ORPHAN.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the incidents just related, that Rose Foster was seated in the bed-chamber where she was still a prisoner at Mrs. Brace's house.

The poor girl was pale and care-worn—and her whole aspect showed that she was devoured by an intense grief, alternating only with intervals of blank despair.

Three days had passed since those memorable incidents which saw her at one moment at the mercy of the Prince—then delivered by the sudden irruption of Meagles and Melmoth into the room—and then snatched away from their protection to be held a miserable captive once more, and reserved perhaps for that dishonour from which she could not now see a single avenue of escape—unless it were by the appalling path of suicide!

We shall not on this occasion undertake to describe at length the condition of mind to which bitter persecution and agonising suspense had once more reduced this poor, innocent, harmless orphan girl: suffice it to say that at the moment when we now again introduce our readers to her presence, she was seated in the bed-chamber of her captivity—alone, with the crushing companionship of her own tremendous affliction!

Suddenly she was startled by hearing the key turn in the lock—and as she sprang from her seat, the door opened. A crimson flush came and went upon her whole countenance as rapidly as the shadow of a flitting cloud passes over a field: and then, with cheeks once more colourless, but with a nervous agitation convulsing her from head to foot, she beheld the Prince of Wales enter the room. Not a cry escaped her lips: she knew that no screaming to which she might give vent, however loud it were, would bring her succour in that accursed house of iniquity;—and suddenly as a man is prompted by the instinct of self-defence to raise his arm to ward off the blow that threatens him,—so speedily did the resolution spring up in the maiden's mind to make one last effort to escape from this atrocious persecution or perish in the attempt!

"My dearest Miss Foster," said the Prince, closing the door, and keeping near it; "once again—for the last time—do I appear in your presence as a suitor. Believe me—oh! believe me, beauteous girl, when I declare that I hate and abhor myself for suffering so much cruelty to be practised towards you: but my love is stronger than my mercy—my passion dominates over my sense of justice. Now be reasonable, angelic girl—and look well at your own position. You cannot escape hence—and I am determined to make you mine! Why not surrender, then, with a good grace?—wherefore not accept the brilliant position which I offer you? Your resistance, sweet Rose, has already been strenuous, sincere, and protracted enough to satisfy the most delicate scruples of your virgin innocence: and now would you be acting wisely and prudently to make a merit of necessity. Oh! be cruel no longer, Rose—surrender at discretion—and do not compel me to have recourse to means which my soul abhors and which I should regret evermore!"

The Prince paused for a reply: but the young maiden uttered not a syllable. Nevertheless, her flashing eyes and her heaving bosom convinced him that his words had produced an effect upon her—but not that which he hoped and anticipated: for instead of melting into tears and succumbing to the force of circumstances against which she could no longer resist, her appearance showed that her mind was shocked and all her virtuous indignation provoked by the language against which she could not close her ears.

"You do not answer me, sweet girl—and you are angry," said the Prince. "Oh! wherefore treat me thus? Why do you regard me as your bitterest enemy—I, who seek to become your best friend! Neither menaces nor entreaties appear to move you: and yet you are a woman—with a woman's heart!"

"Oh! at length you compel me to answer you, vile man," exclaimed the orphan girl, her cheeks becoming crimson with indignation, and her eyes, usually so mild and benignant in expression, now suddenly flashing fire: "you compel me to answer

you, I say, because you dare level your atrocious calumnies against the entire female sex! What—do you suppose that because in the ranks of aristocracy and fashion you have encountered titled ladies whose complaisance towards yourself has only been equalled by their contempt for the poor and humble,—do you imagine that because Duchesses, Marchionesses, and Countesses have been proud to win your smiles even at the price of their virtue,—do you fancy, I say, that because you have hitherto found female honour a thing of snow which the sunlight of Royalty can melt in a moment—do you believe, on this account, that you have obtained a large experience of the mind and character of the entire sex? No, Prince of Wales—ten thousand times no! There is virtue in English women—there is honour in the hearts of British females. But not in the gilded saloons of fashion—nor in the mansions of the titled—nor in the gorgeous equipages which dash along, with Beauty lounging so languishingly inside,—no—not *there* must you look for bright specimens of female virtue! But you must seek them amongst those classes which you and your courtly sycophants despise,—the middle and the working-classes, I mean;—and there only will you find the brows that are worthy to be adorned with the white roses emblematic of purity!"

While giving utterance to this indignant defence on behalf of the majority of her sex, the beauty of the young maiden expanded into radiancy. Her forehead seemed to grow higher, and wider, and whiter—her eyes became lustrous in the extreme—her countenance glowed with a rich crimson hue—her bosom swelled and heaved as if the humble mortal were suddenly imbued with the Olympian pride of magnificent Juno—and her attitude gave indescribable dignity and grace to her entire form.

The Prince gazed upon her with rapture: he heard the language that flowed from her lips—but marked only the music without heeding the sense;—and as she stood before him, her modest loveliness rapidly appearing to expand into the glory of a goddess, his passion was excited to a pitch absolutely maddening. In his veins boiled the frenzied blood—in his heart raged consuming fires. Had the sacrifice of all his royal prospects been demanded at the moment—or had Satan suddenly appeared to propose a compact involving eternal perdition—the Prince would have yielded unhesitatingly, so long as the next moment should have assured him the possession of that lovely creature whose very innocence and resistance had rendered him all the more eager to revel in her charms!

"You talk of white roses—the emblems of purity!" he exclaimed, the last words of her sublime remonstrance alone carrying their meaning into a mind that was all in a ferment with maddened desires and licentious longings: "Oh! be thou my blushing rose—tender and soft as thou art in name——"

And, darting towards her, he sought to clasp her in his arms.

But quick as this movement on his part was, more lightly by far did the maiden spring aside—and, rushing past him, she gained the door. In another moment the Prince had turned—and his hand was upon her shoulder: but at the same instant she succeeded in opening the door—and, disengaging herself by a desperate effort from the grasp which he fixed upon her, she darted from the room.

Not a word—not a cry escaped her lips: desperation nerved her—and she knew that it was useless to raise an alarm.

Fleet as the fawn, she reached the head of the stairs, down which she was about to precipitate herself, when she beheld Mrs. Brace ascending them. An ejaculation burst from the milliner's tongue—for she instantly perceived, by the flying girl and the pursuing Prince, how matters stood.

Springing back—sweeping like lightning past his Royal Highness, whose arms were extended to clutch her—the maiden gained the stairs leading to the top of the house. Three or four steps did she ascend at a time:—the angle was turned—the next landing reached! Another flight was already more than half ascended ere the Prince, panting and puffing, had surmounted the former. But Rose runs for her honour—which is dearer to her than life!

The uppermost storey is now gained; and the young lady enters the passage whence the attics open. But it forms no part of her plan to seek refuge in either of those rooms: as well might she have remained in the one whence she has just succeeded in escaping!

A species of ladder, or rough ascent of steps, catches her eye! Joy—joy! her calculation was correct—the hope which she had entertained is fulfilled—the means of flight are there! Up that ladder she climbs—her little feet scarcely touching the steps, so glancingly do they move over them: she raises a trap door—she enters the loft at the top of the house,—that loft whence she knows there is a means of escape provided, in case of fire!

And now the glance which she flings behind her shows her the Prince just at the moment that he reaches the foot of the ladder. She lets the trap-door fall—she stoops and feels for a bolt, the loft being nearly dark: but there is no fastening—and without wasting another instant, she sweeps her eyes along the interior of the sloping roof. Her glance catches a pensile streak of light gleaming through a crevice: it is a trap-door which opens on to the top of the dwelling!

But it is fastened—and she loses a few moments in drawing back the rusty bolt. At length it yields—and she climbs through that trap-door opening on to the roof, just at the moment that the Prince enters the loft from the trap door at the summit of the ladder.

The maiden pauses on the giddy height—and her looks are averted shudderingly from the yawning depth beneath: for a low parapet running along the top of the house, alone stands between her feet and destruction! One moment's giddiness—one false step—and down, down would she fall into the paved yard which separates the back of the house in Pall Mall from the back of that in St. James's Square.

She paused, we say, for an instant as she stepped forth upon the roof—and almost immediately the Prince appeared at the trap-door. Then Rose Foster stepped from the sloping roof on to the parapet—at the same instant that the Prince sprang forth on the tilings!

"Rose—dearest Rose, in the name of God! come back," he cried, in a tone so changed by dread horror that it seemed like the voice of an old man of eighty.

"No—'tis for you to go back," exclaimed the intrepid girl, every lineament of her ashy pale countenance expressing desperate resolution: "for

if you advance another step, I take Almighty God to witness that I will plunge headlong into the awful chasm below!"

Scarcely were these terrible words uttered, when Mrs. Brace appeared at the trap-door; and an indescribable consternation seized upon her as she beheld the young maiden balancing herself upon the edge of that precipice, like a bird upon a twig of the tallest tree of the forest.

"My God! my God!" murmured the milliner, the dread horror of the first instant now changing into a vertigo which appeared to whirl her round and round.

"Rose—Rose—I conjure you to return!" exclaimed the Prince, who was likewise a prey to a hideous giddiness, produced by the sight of that charming young girl hovering on the very brink of destruction.

"Dare to touch me now—and I leap into the embrace of Death!" cried Rose, her voice swelling into the pœan of a thrilling triumph—for she knew that her honour was now safe, even though its security were to be purchased by the sacrifice of her life!

And having spoken these animated words, she began to tread lightly and rapidly along the parapet—while the Prince and Mrs. Brace followed her with their eyes,—speechless horror enthralling them, and neither daring to move hand nor foot, so utterly absorbed in the frightful spectacle were they! For it seemed as if the slightest breath or the contact of a feather would cause the maiden to lose her balance and hurl her down into the abyss that yawned below.

On she went—heeding them not—treading cautiously though lightly and rapidly. She might have stepped off the parapet, back upon the roof, and thus pursued her way in comparative safety: but then the Prince would start from the stupor of consternation and spring forward in pursuit! For the risk which she was daring was the talisman that held him thus spell-bound: and therefore in her present appalling peril in one sense, lay all her chance of safety in another!

Upwards of a minute was thus passed—tremendous danger to herself and exquisite suspense to the vile Prince and the infamous woman who beheld her! On she went—the slightest giddiness or the least tripping, and she would be lost! But no—Providence watched over her thus far;—and she gained in safety the attic-window of an adjacent house!

She looked back: the Prince was standing, paralysed with horror, in the spot where she had last seen him; and Mrs. Brace was leaning half out of the trap-door, in a similar state of mind. Pursuit, then, was not to be dreaded, and, thrusting open the window, Rose Foster entered the chamber to which it belonged.

No one was there—and the maiden passed on into a passage, whence she gained the staircase. This she descended—but not without some degree of alarm lest she should be taken for a thief and summarily treated as one ere she was allowed to offer a word of explanation. Confidence, however, gained upon her as she advanced without experiencing any molestation: and she had actually descended as far as the hall without meeting a soul, when she suddenly encountered an elderly woman who proved to be a domestic in the service of the family occupying the house.

To this female did Rose in a few hurried words state enough to enlist her sympathy; and, with an observation to the effect that "she had for some time believed Mrs. Brace's establishment to be no better than it should be," the good woman hastily supplied the fugitive young girl with an old bonnet and shawl. Farther than this her benevolence could not extend: but the gift was of infinite value to Rose at that moment and under such circumstances—and her gratitude was commensurate.

Another moment—and the orphan emerged forth into Pall Mall, the good-natured domestic stationing herself upon the threshold of the door to watch that no molestation was offered from Mrs. Brace's house adjoining.

All was quiet—and the young girl escaped in safety from a neighbourhood where she had suffered so much persecution and had endured such intense anguish!

Penniless — houseless—friendless, Rose Foster sped away! And now the supernal courage which had hitherto sustained her throughout the incidents of her escape, underwent a painful reaction;—and an overpowering sense of oppression seized upon her. Her brain began to whirl—the ground appeared to tremble and rock beneath her feet—and the powers of memory failed her. She felt as if she were going mad: nor could she steady her ideas sufficiently to resolve in her mind what course she should adopt. Though ignorant of the atrocious treatment which Meagles and Melmoth had experienced at the hands of the Government, she thought not of visiting the abode of either: but she hurried on—on—through the maze of the metropolis—intent only on placing as great a distance as possible between herself and the neighbourhood in which Mrs. Brace dwelt.

The sun went down—darkness fell upon the earth—and still the unfortunate girl wandered on like one demented. At length she gained the open fields—and she was glad! But now memory began to assert its empire and her thoughts gradually grew more settled. A consciousness of her true position came upon her with overwhelming force—and, while sinking with fatigue, she saw that she was houseless, penniless, friendless! Then did she recollect Meagles and Melmoth; and bitterly, bitterly did she blame herself for not repairing at once to either of them so soon as she escaped from the milliner's house.

It began to rain — and she looked through the darkness for some light that should guide her to a place of shelter. A gleam appeared at a short distance on the left: and thitherward she bent her steps. But the light speedily vanished;—and on reaching the spot whence it had shone, she found herself close by a large building in process of erection.

Exhausted alike in mind and body, the unhappy girl dragged her weary limbs within the circuit of the walls; and, having discovered a nook which would at least protect her from the rain, she sank down there—enshrouded by total darkness!

CHAPTER CXIX.

A NIGHT OF BLOOD.

THE partially-erected structure where the orphan had thus accidentally taken refuge, was that very

establishment which Arthur Eaton had founded: and at this identical moment he was inside the building, accompanied by William Dudley. The light which Rose Foster had seen was caused by the lantern carried by the valet as his master explained to him the purport of the architectural arrangements made since they last visited the premises in this manner: and the sudden disappearance of that light may be accounted for by the circumstance of the young gentleman and his attendant passing farther into the interior of the edifice.

Thus, while the Hon. Arthur Eaton was inspecting the progress of the works, in company with William Dudley, Rose Foster was seeking a shelter from the rain in a nook of that maze of half-finished buildings. Presently a profound sleep fell upon the maiden—for, as we have already observed, she was exhausted alike in mind and body.

But presently a wild cry—the appalling cry of "Murder!" ascended from the midst of the edifice; and Rose started up in horror. For a moment she fancied that she had been dreaming: but this idea was instantaneously dissipated by the loud lamentations which, coming from the interior of the building, smote her ear; — and, seized with a mortal terror, the wretched girl fled precipitately.

It chanced that some labourers, returning home from their work, were passing by the place at that moment; and they were alarmed by the rending cry of "Murder"—a cry always dreadful, but doubly hideous when thrilling through the darkness. They stopped to listen—loud lamentations followed: and by these were they assured that the former cry was neither a delusion on their part nor a mischievous jest on that of others.

Towards the building they accordingly hastened—and in a few moments they encountered some one flying as if on the wings of the wind. Under such suspicious circumstances, and with the cry of "Murder" still sounding in their ears, they laid violent hands on the fugitive. This was Rose Foster;—and, with a thrilling scream and a desperate struggle, she endeavoured to tear herself from the grasp of the men—for so confused and bewildered was she by the abrupt manner in which she had been startled from her sleep, and so completely had terror gained possession of her, that in the wild chaos of her ideas it was no wonder if she fancied herself to be falling into the power of emissaries sent out by the Prince or Mrs. Brace to capture her. But the resistance thus offered on her part, only tended to confirm the suspicions of the labourers; — and, despite of her piercing shrieks and her violent struggles, they dragged her into the interior of the buildings. Thence did the bitterest lamentations still emanate; —and in about a minute the appearance of a light guided the men, with their screaming captive, to the spot where an appalling spectacle met their view!

Upon the ground lay William Dudley, weltering in his gore and quite dead—while in his breast still appeared the instrument wherewith the fatal blow had been struck by an assassin hand. And bending over the corpse, in a frantic state, was Arthur Eaton —clasping his hands wildly and rending the air with his passionate lamentations.

The lantern stood upon the ground, and lighted this scene of mingled horror and woe!

Roused by the rush of many feet and the dreadful shrieking of the half-maddened Rose Foster, Arthur Eaton turned towards the party; and the instant that he beheld *a female dressed in black* amidst the men, he sprang forward, exclaiming, "Behold the murderess!"

Then a shriek—louder, longer, more piercing, and more thrilling than all the rest—burst from the lips of Rose Foster;—and she fainted in the arms of the men who held her in their grasp.

When she awoke to consciousness, she was in the infirmary of Clerkenwell Prison.

* * * * *

* * * * *

The scene changes to Fore Street, Lambeth.

Three hours had passed since the terrible tragedy enacted in the half-finished buildings at Pentonville; —and it was now about a quarter past eleven on this memorable night.

From a back room on an upper storey of Mrs. Lindley's house a young female stole noiselessly forth, bearing a candle in her hand;—and descending the stairs in breathless silence, she opened the door of the midwife's parlour.

But to her surprise and alarm, lights were burning within—and the great black cat, springing wildly forth, swept madly past the affrighted girl. Caroline Walters—for she it was—felt herself suddenly seized upon by a vague and unknown terror; and staggering against the door-post, she threw her startled looks around the room.

And—O horror! upon what appalling object did they settle?

Upon the carpet was stretched the old midwife—a ghastly corpse!—and bathed in the blood that was still flowing from her neck.

For an instant Caroline Walters stood gazing, spell-bound and transfixed to the spot with dread horror:—then, urged by the impulse of an indescribable terror, she turned to fly from the awful scene.

But on the stairs she encountered the two servants of the establishment; and, overcome by her horrified feelings, she gave vent to a loud scream and fainted in their arms.

When she regained her senses, she was in a hackney-coach and in the custody of two constables, who were conveying her to Horsemonger Lane Gaol on a charge of being the murderess of the midwife!

END OF VOLUME I.

THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WEHR-WOLF," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "THE PIXY," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "THE SEAMSTRESS," &c.

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THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE PRINCE'S DREAM.

'Twas deep midnight—and his Royal Highness the heir-apparent to the British throne lay sleeping in his voluptuous couch.

Wax-candles were burning upon the toilette-table: a lamp stood near the bed;—and a fire blazed cheerfully in the grate. Mellow was the lustre thus diffused through the gorgeously-furnished apartment: the atmosphere was warm and perfumed;—and the heavy drapery of the windows suffered not the

slightest breath of the chill air without to penetrate into this chamber where Royalty slept.

The Prince was lying upon his back: his countenance was flushed—the veins on his forehead were swollen—and his slumber was uneasy. The lamplight played upon his agitated features; and as his lips were parted and his eye-lids not quite closed, the gleaming of the clenched teeth and the appearance of a portion of the whites of his eyes gave him a ghastly aspect—as if, although the body were locked in repose, the soul within was awake and enduring the pangs of hell.

Had any one stood by his couch to contemplate him *then*, the effect would have been hideous and appalling on the mind of the observer: but no eye witnessed his uneasy slumbers—none save that of God from whose vigilance no mortal can escape!

The Prince was dreaming. It appeared to him that a faint gauzy mist rose slowly but steadily around his couch, until the entire apartment was filled with a vapour which gradually became more and more dense until it assumed an opaqueness and produced a stifling sensation as if he were enveloped in a thick cloud. Then a wail stole through the midnight air upon his ears,—a wail low, plaintive, and ineffably mournful as if the spirit of some departed mother had returned to earth to sing a lullaby over the cradle of the babe whom she had left behind her. With enthralled senses and with an interest painfully acute, did the Prince feel that his eyes were fixed upon a certain spot beyond all power of withdrawal:—and there—in that spot—the cloud grew thicker and more dense, until a female shape appeared in the midst.

And now that shape passed slowly—slowly along before the Prince, upon whose forehead a cold dew broke forth; and, with feelings wrought up to horror indescribable, did he recognise in the spectral form the once glorious beauty of one of the many victims of his lust! But as he still gazed with haggard eyes, another shape stood slowly forth from the dark cloud;—and then another—and another—and another! And they each and all wore the semblance of lovely girls whom he had wooed and either seduced or ravished in his time,—fair creatures who had gone down to the tomb with broken hearts and blighted affections—in shame and infamy!

But although these spectral shapes were the semblance of those perished victims, yet was their beauty glacial with the colourless hue and the marble inanimation of death;—and their forms were wrapped in the long flowing garments of the grave!

Slowly, like a funereal procession, did the phantoms move round the couch—each circuit that they made rendering them more dreadful to look upon and likewise adding to their number.

And now some appeared to have babes in their arms,—spectral babes as ghastly as the parents that clasped them to their marble bosoms,—babes which were the fruit of those pleasures that the Prince had purchased either by means of the most insidious perfidy or the most heartless violence! And those infants had all died either at their births or soon afterwards,—some sacrificed to the fatal compression adopted by their miserable mothers to conceal their shame—others murdered outright by suffocation, or even by a bloody violence, during the puerperal aberrations of those dishonoured beings who gave them birth!

Round the Prince's couch did the grim and ghastly procession go—the shapes alike of mothers and babes gradually losing their natural lineaments and becoming horrible, horrible to gaze upon! And with their stony eyes did they glare on the anguished Prince,—those eyes which lost their vital colouring and became of a dull, light, leaden blue! Yes—mothers and babes alike glared thus on the Prince: babes and mothers reproached him equally with their dead lustreless orbs.

And though no word was said, yet were these corpse-like eyes as eloquent as tongues. For they renewed in the harrowed memory of the Prince all the details of his amours with those whose phantoms now reproached him with their stony looks;—and he felt that he was a vile seducer in some instances and a cold-blooded ravisher in others! Then he was reminded that he was the father of those babes whose innocent lives had been extinguished almost as soon as the spark had gleamed;—and the tremendous truth was held up before him in all its darkest, blackest colours, that *he* was the man who deserved to be stigmatised as the moral murderer—if not the actual assassin!

And now a wild cry, whose agonizing intonations evinced all the pangs endured by the conscience-stricken man, burst from his lips,—a cry that mental torture wrung from him in his sleep,—an expression of inward poignancy sent forth from the chaos of a soul whereon the spirit of remorse was moving!

Still he awoke not; despite of the lancinating anguish which rent his entire being, he slumbered on.

And more quickly began to circle the ghastly train of phantoms round his bed—and yet more hideous did they grow. The lamplight seemed to impart a living lustre to the wasted and faded lineaments, making death more appalling and the uprisen tenants of the grave more terrible to gaze upon!

But by degrees they lost the flowing garments that wrapped their forms—and their forms began to lose their flesh and their shapeliness therewith—until at last it was a troop of bleached and gleaming skeletons which now whirled, and whirled, and whirled around the bed of the princely sleeper!

Mothers and babes, on the skeletons went: babes and mothers, round and round the couch they glided on! With rattling bones the awful pageantry of Death swept past and fast;—and on the horror-stricken Prince did the hideous shapes now seem to glare with eyeless sockets!

Yes—past and fast went the grim array,—mothers and babes—babes and mothers—all with rattling bones!

And with the giddy dance of the skeleton throng, whirled the brain of the maddened Prince: torture and horror—crucifixion and anguish—delirium and despair, all seemed to enwrap him with the pains of hell. He tossed and heaved in his couch as if the voluptuous feather-bed were a huge snake coiled under him and the downy pillows were filled with scorpions. The perspiration poured off him in torrents: the veins of his forehead were swollen as if tensely strung blue cords lay entertwined and knotted just beneath the skin. Oh! the fierce—the wearing—the rending agony of these few minutes during which the gleaming train of skeletons circled about the royal bed!

And now—rapidly as a troop of dancers glide from the stage of a theatre when their part is over—did the hideous phantasmagoria disappear, skeleton after

skeleton; and darkness—stupendous darkness—fell upon the scene.

But this darkness was only a portion of the Prince's vision: for the wax-lights, the lamp, and the fire still burnt in the apartment. Therefore was it in his dream that he was entombed in so dense and pitchy a blackness: and while he fancied that his eyes were wide open and looking as it were into this deep unfathomable gloom, vivid lightnings appeared to gleam at short intervals across the palpable darkness.

And then an awful voice—sonorous as if it were the rolling of a huge metal ball on an elastic bridge of brass, and solemn as if it came from a being whose abode was on the other side of the tomb—spoke in the following manner:—

"O Prince! has the world no warnings for thee and has hell no terrors, that thou livest in defiance alike of God and Man? From him to whom much is given, much is expected: but although earth hath no example of a being on whose head such benefits are heaped as on thine, still hast thou paid not the smallest mite into the treasury of the future. The white page allotted to thee in the book of the Recording Angel is a blank: whereas thy black page is covered with entries written in the hues of blood. A moral scourge art thou upon the earth; and already are thy crimes so great that if not another misdeed were added, still hast thou done enough to render thy name accursed until the end of time! The present generation, blinded by the dazzling rays of Royalty, beholds not all the hideous blackness of thy character: but when, in the course of a few short years, a more comprehensive liberalism shall have taught the nation to contemplate even its Kings without prejudice, thou wilt be regarded as one of the blackest monsters of iniquity that ever disgraced the human species. And then a man will arise, bold enough to tear away the glossy veil which hides the deformities of the mighty by birth and the exalted in rank; and with an iron pen will he delineate all the evil traits of thy character, and mercilessly though truthfully depict all the misdeeds of thy life. For how manifold are thy enormities—and how poor the compensation offered by any opposite qualities! Selfish egotist that thou art, if thine eyes fall upon a charming flower blooming in its virgin innocence, 'tis but to blight it with thy lustful looks: if thou beholdest the sunny smiles of maiden artlessness, the hot breath of thine unholy passion comes upon her like a pestilence, and thy kisses leave pollution upon her lips as the snail voids its slime upon the leaf of the rose! Oh! for the hearts which thou hast broken—Oh! for the fervid affections which thou hast crushed for ever! The joy of thy conquests remains impressed upon thy mind while the victim moulders in that deep silent tomb from whence there is no return. Thou triumphest in pleasures which are purchased by tears—lamentations—and premature deaths! Has some poor widow a lovely daughter whom she cherishes as a pet-lamb, the lone woman's comfort must nevertheless be torn away from her to minister to the delights of the Prince of Wales! Has some father an only child—a blooming girl reminding him of the much-loved wife whom he has lost—this fair being, the old man's prop and support, must be snatched from his arms to suit the lascivious fantasies of the Prince of Wales! Oh! that such things should be, and scarcely excite a sentiment of remorse in the breast of him who causeth that wide-spread misery! But hear me, Prince of Wales—hear me, and tremble! Thou may'st pursue thine atrocious career in this life—thou may'st go through nature's garden plucking the fairest flowers, revelling in their perfume for a moment, and then tossing them aside to wither prematurely—and thou may'st continue to feast thine ears with the lamentations of ruined girls as if 'twere the most delicious music;—but, as truly as there is a God above—a God who avenges as well as rewards—a God who is just as well as merciful,—so surely shall condign punishment await thee, O Prince, in the world to come!"

Such was the terrible address which rolled sonorously upon the ears of the heir-apparent to the throne, as he lay locked in profound slumber: and then, as the unknown voice died away like departing thunder, a form blacker than the darkness appeared to stand out from the dense cloud surrounding the bed. And the Prince fancied that he was gazing steadfastly upon the appalling phenomenon, and that the sable shape expanded into colossal proportions, until it became a mighty giant of hideous mien and terrible aspect.

Then again the voice rolled on the ears of the Prince of Wales, while the portentous phantom stretched out its ebon arm with menacing gesticulation.

"As yet thou hast traced thy path amidst the roses and fairest flowers of the earth," spoke the colossal being; "and thou hast wooed and courted pleasure in every shape. All that is loveliest of female beauty—all that is most luxurious of banquetting and festivity—all that is most sumptuous and splendid, most magnificent and gorgeous, in palaces and equipages,—all, all hast thou made thine own. The four corners of the earth have been ransacked to bring together the means and materials for thy enjoyments: wert thou a deity, thy pomp and thy state could not be exceeded. The millions toil in starvation to maintain thee in luxury; and it would seem as if those millions were created only to serve thee as slaves! Thine egotism has ranged over the whole world to find food for its aliment—and it remains insatiate still! Thy whole life is pleasure—thy whole existence luxury and love. Instead of there being a morrow, and a morrow, and a morrow for thee—each having new duties and bringing with it new cares—it seems as if thine entire existence were a mere continuous dream of soft indolence and voluptuous enjoyment. Such is thy career upon earth: but what will be thy doom hereafter? Oh! hideous and appalling contrast—a contrast beyond the conjecture of even the wildest and most horrified imagining. But thou hast feasted almost to satiety upon earthly pleasures—thou hast bathed to the very hair of thine head in the world's fount of bliss! Now, then, behold the doom which awaits thee after death!"

Thus speaking, the colossal phantom encircled the Prince with his huge sable arm; and his Royal Highness shrieked piercingly in the midst of his slumber—for it seemed as if the cold and slimy contact of a tremendous snake were coming upon him. And he writhed and struggled with horrible convulsions in the imaginary grasp of the sable being: and then it appeared as if he were suddenly torn away from his couch and carried with appalling rapidity through an atmosphere as black as pitch and as dense as if it were one vast mass of soot. The numbness of an awful consternation now fell upon him; his tongue was paralysed, so that he

could not give vent to the scream which he wished to send forth as the expression of his agony;—and through the black palpable mist was he borne along, with hurricane speed, in the arms of the colossal phantom whose touch was like that of the slimy snake.

On—on through the stupendous soot-mist did the terrible being bear the Prince, whose mind was filled with such dire horror that no mortal pen can find words to depict it—no human language afford terms to delineate its intensity. And by degrees the conviction dawned in unto the soul of *this* Prince that he was in the embrace of *another* Prince, more powerful than himself—the Prince of the Realms of Darkness! At the same time that this reflection was working its way into his mind, he became aware that the shape of the colossal being was growing every instant more and more terrible: for although the headlong journey was continued through the black darkness which was *felt* with the same sensation as if the Prince were being dragged through a pool of muddy water,—yet was he enabled to trace all the outlines of the hideous being that held him in its infernal grasp. And he saw that instead of possessing legs and feet, the lower portion of the demon's body elongated in the form of a tremendous serpent —the vast mass of moving, loathsome, undulating blackness stretching away, away, to an incalculable distance and at length being lost in the soot-like gloom. And as the fiend went rushing on with the speed of the hurricane, thousands of miles a minute, that monstrous tail rolled after him in a huge sable volume, as if the darkest thunder-cloud had gathered to form his train!

As the traveller through a night of pitchy obscurity catches a glimpse of lights glimmering in the distance and beholds them increasing in brightness and in number as he draws nearer and nearer, until he distinguishes a vast city splendidly illuminated to celebrate some grand festive occasion,—so did the Prince of Wales now begin to catch glimpses of far-off fires, which gradually developed their vastness and their lurid brilliancy to his view, as the demon hurried him on towards that appalling destination. At length it appeared to the gaze of the horrified Prince that he was approaching an illimitable tract of country all flooded with liquid flames, as the fields of the Earth are inundated with water. Pestilential odours filled his nostrils with a sulphurous smell, and his throat grew parched as if he had been swallowing ashes. A sense of consuming heat came rapidly upon him at the same time; and he knew that he was being borne headlong on towards the endless burning lake of hell!

But suddenly the demon stopped short—and his sable arms placed the Prince upon the summit of a pillar shooting up from some unfathomable depth below,—a black marble pillar on which his Royal Highness was left by the fiend to balance himself as well as he might, with the intuitive conviction that if he fell it would be to encounter destruction.

"Behold my kingdom!" exclaimed the Prince of Darkness, addressing the Prince of the Earth in that sonorous voice which now seemed to roll in undulating waves of sound throughout all space. "Upon the earth, immense is the line of demarcation which selfishness, egotism, and usurpation have traced between the high-born and the humble—the pampered few and the toiling many! But in my kingdom all are equal—and those distinctions disappear! In yon fiery lake, Kings are suffering by the side of beggars—Popes and Bishops are writhing in the same pit with thieves and vagabonds. But if there be places in my realms where tortures are more exquisitely keen than elsewhere,—if there be spots where the fire burns more intensely and serpents bite more sharply than in others,—then do I reserve those scenes of excelling anguish for the souls of men who have occupied the highest places upon the earth! And now behold the wonders and the horrors of my kingdom!"

With these words, the fiend waved his mighty arm, the sweeping effect of which was as if a strong wind suddenly agitated the sooty darkness that filled the air above the lake of fire; and it seemed to the Prince as if he tottered and shook upon the summit of the colossal pinnacle where he stood. But recovering his balance just at the moment when he was about to give vent to a piercing shriek in the terror of falling, his Royal Highness suddenly beheld a strange and fearful spectacle.

For the lake of fire had risen in a moment so high up that it appeared as if he suddenly beheld by the aid of a microscope a scene which was far distant and confused before. And that flood of flaming lava was now swarming with life—as a drop of muddy water abounds in hideous things when inspected by the magnifying power of the instrument just mentioned.

Yes—there, in that vast range of fire which stretched illimitably northward and southward, eastward and westward,—there, in the erubescent flood of living, liquid flames which glowed with a withering, stifling heat,—there, in that boundless morass of ever burning levin, writhed the millions that people Satan's Kingdom! Attired as they were when upon the earth, and retaining all their mortal lineaments, those immortal spirits of the damned tossed, heaved, and struggled with hideous convulsions amidst the tortures that enveloped them. But, oh! with what an awful shudder and with what a direful sickness at the heart, did the Prince of Wales observe that amongst the doomed myriads were thousands and thousands wearing crowns, or mitres, or coronets—the emblems of their rank on earth! Yes—and how vast was the proportion of those whose forms were decked in rich garments, and who had gold chains suspended to their necks and glistening rings upon their fingers—the evidences of the luxury in which they had revelled during their lives! And then, indeed, did the horrified Prince behold the fulfilment of the divine saying, that *it is easier for a cable to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!*

Suddenly, while he was yet gazing upon the tremendous scene which stretched around and far away —that ocean of living fire which had no limit and which was bounded by no shore—the demon grasped him again with his sable hand which was fashioned like the claw of a vulture; and, holding him forth at arm's length over the candescent flood which glowed and roared below, he exclaimed in a loud voice—"Now shalt thou receive the reward due to thy crimes! Octavia Clarendon and all thine other victims shall be avenged! Down, down into the depths of hell—and writhe there henceforth in everlasting torments!"

As these last words rolled away from the demon's lips—sounding like awful thunderings throughout the realms of space—he relinquished his hold upon the Prince, who instantaneously fell screaming and shrieking horribly through the jet black air.

But just as it appeared to the wretched George that he was about to plunge headlong into the fiery lake, he awoke with so convulsive a start that the massive bedstead shook and quivered beneath him.

Then he lay motionless—utterly motionless—for a few minutes, striving to collect his scattered thoughts and settle his scared ideas in such a manner as to deduce from them the conviction that it was really all a dream!

But such a dream——Oh! the death-bed has known no anguish and the churchyard has seen no mental misery more poignant than the hell of excruciating feelings through which the Prince of Wales had passed in that tremendous vision. Still upon his corrugated brows stood the big drops of terror—still upon his countenance lingered the lines into which its hideous workings had convulsed it—and still was the sense of an awful consternation upon his brain and in his heart.

At length, when assured that there was nothing of reality in all that he had gone through, he raised himself in the bed—poured a quantity of brandy into a tumbler—and drank the burning alcohol at a draught. Then, closing his eyes, he endeavoured to settle himself to sleep again; and slumber was just weighing down his lids, when a strange noise at the farther end of the spacious apartment fell upon his ears.

CHAPTER CXXI.

A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

WITHOUT shifting his position in the bed—for he was so far overcome with drowsiness as to be unwilling to make any exertion—the Prince of Wales opened his eyes: but he was instantaneously recalled to complete consciousness, when he beheld the door of the secret staircase open slowly and cautiously. The idea that thieves had dared to break into Carlton House naturally flashed to his mind; and he thrust his hand towards the silken bell-cord which hung behind the curtains, when to his amazement he recognised the well-known form of the Amazon as she noiselessly glided into the room.

The first suspicion now yielded to the thought that Lady Lade, presuming upon the intimacy of a former occasion when she had disported with his Royal Highness in the bath, was intent upon some frolic; and, all idea of danger being instantaneously dissipated, the Prince raised himself in his couch and surveyed the beauteous intruder with mingled feelings of curiosity and indignation.

Closing the door as gently as she had opened it, the Amazon, who was dressed in her male attire, approached the couch; and when she saw that the Prince was awake and gazing upon her, she took off her hat—smoothed down her glossy hair—and bent upon him a smiling look fraught with a wanton sweetness that immediately disarmed him of his anger.

"Pardon me, your Royal Highness," she said, advancing close up to the bed,—"pardon me for this unwarrantable liberty—this extraordinary intrusion,—and deign to hear me while I give a brief explanation of my motive."

"Beauteous lady," exclaimed the Prince, now feeling assured that the Amazon suspected not his treachery towards Tim Meagles—although he was curious to learn what effect that individual's sudden disappearance had produced upon her, as well as the conjecture which she might have formed relative to the cause of it,—"beauteous lady, if you come to me as the representative of the Goddess of Love and Pleasure, you are truly welcome: for not only am I passionately enamoured of your charms, but I am likewise far from displeased at the sudden and unexpected presence of such agreeable company—inasmuch as I have only just awoke from a dream which troubled me not a little."

"My dear Prince," said the Amazon, seating herself on the edge of the bed, and fixing upon him a look full of voluptuous languor, "I came but to consult you *as* a friend and *concerning* a friend. If, however, you wish to receive me in another and more tender capacity, I am your Royal Highness's obedient servant now—as I was a few weeks ago in yonder bath-room."

"You are looking gloriously handsome to-night, Letitia," said the Prince; "and were I an anchorite—which, thank heaven! I am not—you would assuredly tempt me to sin."

"But do permit me to give you some little explanation of this most extraordinary intrusion," exclaimed the Amazon, disengaging herself from the embrace in which the Prince had caught her—though not without having permitted him to cull a few kisses from her moist red lips. "The fact is," she continued, reseating herself upon the bed, but a little farther off than before,—"some days have elapsed since our mutual friend Meagles disappeared most strangely and unaccountably from his lodgings."

"Well—I have missed him too," ejaculated the Prince, colouring deeply as he spoke: but as the Amazon was looking downward at the moment, he flattered himself that his confusion passed unperceived.

"At first," continued Lady Letitia, "I was not at all uneasy, because there might be a thousand reasons for his temporary absence from home. But when a couple of days passed and no tidings were received from him, I began to fancy that he must be in prison—arrested for debt, perhaps—and unwilling to let his friends know of his tribulation. I accordingly visited the Bench and the Fleet, and then made the round of every sponging-house in London——"

"With what result?" demanded the Prince, as if sharing the Amazon's anxiety on behalf of the missing individual.

"With no success whatsoever," replied the lady: "and ever since I have been racking my brain to think what possibly can have become of him. At length—but not until to-night—it struck me that your Royal Highness had probably despatched him upon some secret and important mission; and knowing that he possessed a pass-key to the secret staircase of this apartment, I hastened to his lodgings—possessed myself of it—and made bold to pay the present visit. For when once a particular idea is in my head, I cannot rest until I have acted upon it; and my suspense was too great to permit me to curb it until the morning. Besides, I thought it probable that your Royal Highness might not have yet retired to rest—in which case I hoped and trusted to be pardoned for this intrusion."

"You are pardoned, my dear Letitia," said the Prince: "your forgiveness was sealed by those kisses which you allowed me to snatch just now—and

which," he added, stretching his arms forward and again seizing her round the waist, "I mean to renew."

Thus speaking, the impassioned Prince, fired by the contact of this woman of ripe and luxuriant charms, glued his lips to her's and whisperingly invited her to lay aside her apparel and accept a share of his couch.

"But it was not for this tender dalliance that I came," she responded, in a low and melting tone, as she once more disengaged herself gently from his arms: "it was to obtain intelligence, if possible, concerning my absent friend——"

"And you have understood by what I have already said, my dearest Letitia," answered the Prince, "that I am as ignorant and uneasy relative to Meagles as you are yourself."

"Yes—I feared as much by the observation you made just now," said the Amazon.

"Oh! let us hope that it is only some frolic on our friend's part," exclaimed the Prince,—"and that he will shortly reappear. Perhaps, my bewitching huntress, he is at this moment proving unfaithful to you—as you are about to do in respect to him——"

"Well—even that idea would be a consolation," interrupted the Amazon, appearing to take the suggestion quite seriously. "But if it should prove as your Royal Highness imagines, I can promise Master Meagles that he will be rated soundly by me. Here have I been undergoing all the imaginable and unimaginable tortures of the cruellest suspense——"

"Oh! let me kiss those lips which you pout so prettily!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, snatching her to his arms a third time. "And now, my charming huntress, let me implore you to lay aside the appearance of Diana and come as a yielding Venus to my embrace."

"It is impossible to resist you," said the Amazon; —and rising from her seat on the bed, she proceeded to divest herself of the apparel which became her symmetrical form so admirably.

Then, as the Prince beheld the superb bosom released from its prisonage in the closely fitting frock-coat, and appearing dazzlingly white in the lustre which filled the room,—and as his looks gloated upon the plump and sloping shoulders on which the ebon hair fell in massive tresses,—while the robust but snowy arms, now naked to about midway above the elbow, were curved gracefully behind her back as the taper fingers unloosened the fastening of the corset, —his Royal Highness regretted not that the beauteous wanton had intruded at this unseemly hour into the privacy of his chamber.

But ere she completely finished the task of undressing herself, the Amazon—as if inspired with a certain instinctive feeling of modesty, despite the position in which she was now placed—drew the rich curtain of the bed to conceal her form from the Prince: but this she did in such a manner that the night-table, whereon the soda-water and spirits stood, was left *outside* the drapery, and also hidden therefore from the view of the heir-apparent. Then, having accomplished this little manœuvre, the Amazon took a small phial from the pocket of her breeches and poured a few drops of its dark-coloured contents into the tumbler whence the Prince had already drunk the brandy, as just now stated.

In another minute the Amazon entered the royal couch and was clasped in the impassioned embrace of the fervid voluptuary.

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An hour afterwards Lady Letitia Lade rose gently from the magnificent bed, and began to resume her apparel with all possible despatch.

Glancing towards the Prince, who was sleeping a profound lethargic slumber, she murmured to herself, "The cold-blooded villain! Oh! that I was compelled to endure his detested embraces——But he imbibed the narcotic in the large dram of brandy which I gave him—and he will not awake for hours to come!"

Then a smile of triumph played on the moist coral lips of the Amazon: and, having finished dressing herself, she drew from beneath the Prince's pillow the golden chain to which was suspended the key of curious workmanship. Therewith opening the desk of his Royal Highness, she proceeded to ransack its contents; and in the course of a few minutes she found the papers for which she was searching.

"'Tis as I thought!" she said to herself, again speaking low and murmuringly with her liquid, musical voice. "The traitor—the false friend! But you shall be avenged, Meagles—you shall be avenged —even if I do not succeed in procuring your restoration to this country!"

Then, locking the desk and replacing the chain with the key underneath the pillow of the Prince, Lady Lade secured the papers about her person and took her departure by the secret staircase.

When his Royal Highness awoke at a late hour in the morning, the first conviction that broke upon his mind was that he had a most distressing headache—and then the incidents of the night began to present themselves in due order to his memory. He recollected the hideous dream which had made him endure such exquisite tortures; and those painful reminiscences were followed by that of the visit of Lady Lade.

Yes—she had been with him: she had shared his couch—but for how long? He knew not! The last incident that dwelt in his mind was a laughing proposal which she made him that each should drink a dram of brandy—and he recollected that he had as good-humouredly assented to the proposition and taken his share first, she herself pouring it out and handing it to him. Then he must have fallen into a sound sleep—for he remembered nothing more.

But she was gone—the beautiful huntress had disappeared; — and a vague suspicion of something wrong slowly sprang up in the mind of the Prince. Her mysterious visit—that conversation about Meagles—the dead sleep which had fallen upon him the moment after he had drunk the brandy—the departure of the lady before he awoke—and the unpleasant sensations which he now experienced, and which struck him as being the result of a powerful narcotic, —all these circumstances appeared to link themselves together and form a chain of evidence to support the misgivings which he felt.

CHAPTER CXXII.

EVIL TIDINGS.

WHILE the Prince was thus yielding to his gloomy reflections, Germain the French valet stole gently into the apartment and advanced on tiptoe towards the couch to ascertain whether his master was awake: then perceiving that the royal eyes were wide open,

the dependant bowed and stood in an attitude which showed that he was desirous of being permitted to speak.

"Well, what is it, Germain?" demanded the Prince impatiently—for he was very far from being in the best possible humour.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the valet, "Mrs. Brace solicits an immediate interview on the most important business. She wishes to know whether your Royal Highness will deign to visit her, or whether it is the royal command that she shall wait upon your Royal Highness."

"Then the business is decidedly urgent—eh?" exclaimed the Prince. "Well, let Mrs. Brace come to me by the secret staircase as soon as possible; and in the meantime I shall get up."

Germain bowed and retired: but having despatched the message to the milliner, he hastened back to the royal apartment to assist at the toilette of his master. The Prince, however, only dressed himself in a loose *deshabillée;* and by the time this was done, Mrs. Brace made her appearance. Germain then retired; and the heir-apparent was left alone with the milliner.

"Oh! what a terrible calamity has occurred!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, at once giving vent to the expression of that profound trouble which agitated her.

"What in the name of God is the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, becoming seriously alarmed.

"Rose Foster—the unhappy girl——" ejaculated the milliner.

"Well—well—what of her?" cried the heir-apparent.

"She is in prison, your Royal Highness——"

"In prison!" repeated the Prince, starting from his chair as if he were suddenly galvanised.

"Yes—in prison—on a charge of murder!" added the milliner, quivering from head to foot and her luxuriant bosom heaving and sinking rapidly with the deep emotion which agitated within.

"Is it possible?—or am I dreaming?" exclaimed the Prince, pressing his hand to his brow. "The beauteous name of *Rose* associated with the horrible word *Murder!* Oh! no—no—it cannot be!"

"And yet it is as true as that I am here to tell you the sad tale, or that you are there to hear it," said Mrs. Brace, in a tone that left no possible room for any farther doubt upon the subject.

"But she is utterly incapable of such a crime!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, still cruelly bewildered.

"Of *that* I am well aware," rejoined the milliner. "Nevertheless, a crushing amount of circumstantial evidence weighs against her—and it is impossible at present to say whether the matter will take a turn when the examination comes on at noon this day. At all events, it is probable that the girl may be led into revelations but too well calculated to compromise your Royal Highness and myself——"

"And yet Rose possesses a generous disposition," exclaimed the Prince.

"But she will scarcely scruple to tell the truth—*all the truth*," returned the milliner, emphatically; "to account for her becoming a houseless wanderer last night when the deed was committed——"

"Tell me the circumstances of the case," interrupted the Prince. "At present I am thoroughly in the dark concerning it. Who has been murdered?—where was the crime committed?—and how happened it that the accusation should be made against this poor girl?"

"All I know upon the subject is this," answered Mrs. Brace,—"that about an hour ago the matron of the infirmary of Clerkenwell Prison called upon me to state that a young person had been taken thither last night on a charge of murdering a certain William Dudley, the valet of the Hon. Mr. Eaton, who is the only son of Lord Marchmont. It appears that the crime took place in some unfinished buildings in the north of London; and Rose was captured while flying from the spot."

"But it is impossible that she could have been guilty?" exclaimed the Prince.

"I have already told your Royal Highness I do not believe that she is," answered Mrs. Brace. "To return, however, to what I was saying, the matron of the infirmary informed me that the young prisoner had given her name as Rose Foster and had stated that she had been for some weeks in the employment of myself, but that she had quitted me suddenly for reasons which she should explain if necessary. The matron accordingly visited me to ascertain if those statements were correct. I not only assured her that they were, but likewise expressed my firm conviction of the innocence of the girl, to whom I sent a very kind message by the matron. And now your Royal Highness will please to tell me what is to be done in this most distressing case—for if Rose should explain to the magistrate the causes which drove her forth from my house, I am totally undone."

"What, in the name of heaven, do you advise?" demanded the Prince, becoming more and more agitated every instant. "For my part, I feel as if I were looking through a fog——"

"But in the midst of it there is a pit yawning to swallow us both up!" observed Mrs. Brace, in a tone so profoundly solemn that it caused the Prince to tremble with a cold shudder from head to foot.

At this moment there was a knock at the door; and his Royal Highness exclaimed with petulant impatience, "Come in!"

Germain entered—bowed—and said, "May it please your Royal Highness, a person wishes to see Mrs. Brace immediately upon very particular business."

"Who is it?" demanded the Prince.

"A young lady who gives the name of Forrester?" was the response.

"Ah! one of my own girls!" ejaculated the milliner.

"You had better see what she wants and then come back to me," said the Prince.

Mrs. Brace accordingly retired; and the heir-apparent began to pace to and fro in an agitated manner—for the terrible intelligence he had this morning received troubled him sorely and quite threw into the background of his memory the incidents of the past night.

In a few minutes the milliner returned—or rather staggered back into the royal apartment—her eyes wild and haggard—her countenance deadly pale—and her entire form trembling convulsively.

"What in the name of God is the matter?" demanded the Prince, rushing forward and catching her in his arms.

"Great heaven! what misfortunes—what calamities!" murmured the wretched Mrs. Brace in broken

sentences, as she sank back in the chair to which the Prince bore her.

"Speak—I conjure you to speak, my dear Fanny!" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "What is the matter?—what new misadventure has occurred?"

"Another murder—another horrible murder—and one of my girls in custody upon the charge!" returned Mrs. Brace, gasping forth the words with difficulty. "Oh! ruin is coming upon me—I see it—plain and palpable ——"

"Cease—cease these lamentations," cried the Prince, speaking with feverish impatience as he recovered from the shock which the milliner's terrible revelation had caused him to experience. "Surely your brain must be wandering—your ideas are unsettled—you are labouring under a delusion ——"

"Would to God that I were!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, pressing her hands to her throbbing brows and shuddering visibly. "Rose Foster at Clerkenwell Gaol—Caroline Walters in Horsemonger Lane Prison—each accused of a diabolical murder—each able to make revelations that will bring down ruin—utter ruin upon my head——O God! it is more than I can bear!"

And the wretched woman burst into an agonised fit of weeping.

This efflux of tears consoled her somewhat—or at all events relieved her; and in a few minutes she wiped her eyes, saying, "Misfortunes never come alone—and these are black and threatening indeed!"

"But the second calamity—what is it?" demanded the Prince.

"The midwife in Fore Street—the woman whom I have often named to you—was murdered last night," said Mrs. Brace; "and one of my girls—a certain Caroline Walters—has been taken into custody on suspicion of having perpetrated the deed."

"And is that suspicion well founded, think you?" inquired his Royal Highness.

"Alas! yes," was the mournful response. "Caroline Walters is as capable of the crime imputed to *her*, as Rose Foster is incapable of the deed with which *she* is charged."

"And from what channel have you learnt this new misfortune?" asked the Prince. "Who sent Miss Forrester to you?"

"A Bow Street Officer has just been to my house," returned Mrs. Brace. "Indeed he is waiting there now, in case I should like to see him. For although the murder of the midwife was committed in Lambeth, the magistrates of which district will examine the wretched girl presently, yet this Bow Street officer has been engaged to institute the usual inquiries concerning the accused; and he is now employed in both cases. What shall I do?—would you advise me to see him?"

"I have a very great mind to see him myself," observed the Prince. "These Bow Street runners are men who will do anything for money: they can collect evidence to suit just which side they please—to make black seem white or white black——."

"Oh! if you think—my dear Prince—if you have a hope—to save Rose Foster—yes, and Caroline Walters likewise," gasped Mrs. Brace, throwing herself at the feet of his Royal Highness and seizing both his hands with nervous violence in her own,—"I implore—I beseech that you will see this man——"

"Yes—I will see him!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, forcing the milliner to rise. "But would you seek to save that Caroline Walters whom you believe guilty, as well as our poor Rose Foster whom we feel to be innocent?"

"We must save them both, Prince!" answered Mrs. Brace; "the revelations which Caroline Walters could make concerning me——"

"Enough!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, who appeared to have made up his mind to play a resolute and determined part. "Go and bring the Bow Street officer hither by the private staircase."

"In five minutes he shall be here," answered Mrs. Brace, her countenance lighting up with hope.

She then hurried away—and the Prince resumed his walk up and down the room: but this pacing to and fro was less troubled than before, inasmuch as he persuaded himself that the Bow Street officer would be enabled to avert the peculiar evils which now wore so menacing an aspect.

In a short time the door of the private staircase was opened again—and Mrs. Brace re-appeared, followed by a tall, stout, middle-aged man, shabbily dressed, and carrying a huge stick in his hand. On being thus introduced into the presence of the Prince, the officer made a bow which, though very low, was as awkward and ungainly as if it were an elephant practising an obeisance; then advancing towards his Royal Highness in obedience to a hastily-whispered intimation from the lips of Mrs. Brace, he made another bow and waited to be spoken to.

"What is your name, my good fellow?" inquired the Prince, adopting a very conciliatory tone.

"Peter Grumley, may it please your Royal Highness," answered the official, in a voice which was as rough and hoarse as if he were speaking through a cracked bassoon—for the truth was that he had been singing the best part of the night at a free-and-easy.

"Well, Mr. Peter Grumley, we shall know each other better presently," said the heir-apparent. "I believe you are an officer at Bow Street——"

"The head officer, at your Royal Highness's service," was the response, accompanied by another elephantine bow. "In fact, this here lady," he continued, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards Mrs. Brace, "has told me as how that your Royal Highness has a mind to put a summut in my way—and I should be proud to do anythink to please your Royal Highness, let alone the recompense attending it."

"And I may depend upon your caution and secrecy respecting my interference in the business that I wish to consult you upon?" said the heir-apparent.

"I'd sooner slit my windpipe than blab a syllable," exclaimed Mr. Peter Grumley, with more emphasis than elegance. "Besides, it's my dooty to obey your Royal Highness which will some day be the suverin of these rel-ems."

And the embryo "sovereign of the realms" could not help smiling at the pronunciation of the Bow Street officer, who, thinking that he was bound to take the cue of good manners from the Prince, gave a tremendous grin as if his head were suddenly opening from ear to ear.

"But let us hasten to business," cried the heir-apparent: "for time is precious."

Mr. Grumley's mouth instantly closed—and he became all attention.

"I believe you are engaged in sifting the parti-

culars of the two dreadful murders which were committed last night?" said the Prince, interrogatively.

"Such is my wocation, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Grumley.

"And what is your opinion of each case?" demanded the Prince.

"Well, about the one what took place in the buildings up by Barnsbury Park," rejoined the officer, "I think there's some mystery as will make matters turn up different from what they now appears: for it don't seem natral that a delicate young gal of sixteen should murder a middle-aged walley with whom she doesn't appear to have had any connexion whatsomever. As for t'other case—the one over in Lambeth—I sent my man Mobbs——Please your Royal Highness," continued Grumley, interrupting himself, "Mobbs is my leftenant, as the saying is—my head muck and factotum: he's a cunning blade, is Mobbs——'tis the same wot pitched his wife out of a three-pair back and cut his child's head off some five or six year ago. May be your Royal Highness recollects the circumstance?"

"I cannot exactly say that I do," responded the Prince, with a visible shudder: but he spoke mildly, inasmuch as it was his policy just at this moment to conciliate Mr. Grumley's good opinion as much as possible. "But you were about to give me some information respecting the dreadful affair in Fore Street?"

"Yes—so I were," observed the official. "Well, I was on the pint of telling your Royal Highness that I sent my friend Mobbs over to look arter that little business there—and he's quite convinced from all he saw and heard that the gal Caroline Walters must have butchered the old 'ooman. So in the fust case my opinion is that the accusation is wrongfully made—and in the second I think the charge is correct."

"Can you undertake to get Rose Foster off?" demanded the Prince, now coming direct to the point.

"I can't say—but I think I might," responded Mr. Grumley.

"And Caroline Walters—would it be impossible—utterly impossible——" said the Prince, hesitatingly.

"Nothink is impossible, may it please your Royal Highness," observed Grumley: "but there's a many things that is wery difficult, all the same."

"But you are not the man to be daunted by difficulties?" remarked the heir-apparent.

"Just the last feller in all creation to give up anythink in despair," returned the constable. "Me and Mobbs is the most desperatest chaps in England when we've got a partickler pint in view; and when the means doesn't turn up of their own accord, we makes 'em."

"I see that you are an enterprising man, Mr. Grumley," observed the Prince. "Now the truth is that as these girls who are in custody, have been in the service of Mrs. Brace; and as I take a deep interest in everything that concerns Mrs. Brace——"

"I don't want no explanations and no apologies," interrupted the officer, perceiving with his natural quickness that the Prince had special reasons of his own for the course he was pursuing. "If your Royal Highness wishes that them young gals should be got off, I'll do my best—and Mobbs shall do his best also. But it will cost summut handsome——"

"Not a word more upon that subject!" interrupted the Prince. "Mrs. Brace will give you five hundred guineas as an earnest of future generosity—and if you succeed in the matter, another sum to the like amount shall be yours."

"I'm very much obleeged to your Royal Highness—very much indeed," said Grumley, with a low bow: and he then turned to follow the milliner away from the apartment.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE EXAMINATION.

It was mid-day—and the Police-Office at Bow Street was crowded to excess. The intelligence that a young and beautiful girl was about to be examined on a charge of committing the foul crime of murder, had spread like wild-fire;—and although the morning papers contained not a line upon the subject—for news were not published so speedily in those times as they are at present—yet the entire metropolis had already experienced the sensation of mingled interest and horror invariably attendant upon the circulation of such a rumour. The result was that numbers of persons had been impelled by curiosity to the police-court, which was speedily filled; and an immense multitude, unable to obtain admittance, blocked up the street.

Presently a hackney-coach broke through the congregated mass and drove up to the door of the Office: then, when Rose Foster alighted in the custody of Grumley and Mobbs, instead of being saluted with the yells of execration usually poured forth on such occasions, the young girl's ears caught expressions of sympathy from every side. Nor few were the tongues which expressed a conviction that so sweet a creature could not possibly have committed the odious crime laid to her charge; and these observations enhanced that courage which now armed the poor orphan girl—the courage inspired by conscious innocence!

With modest dignity and with a winning maidenly reserve—as unaffected as every attribute of her virgin soul was guileless and artless—did Rose Foster pass from the hackney-coach along the passage leading to the Office, on entering which she instantly became the focus for the looks of all present. A momentary faintness came over her—an evanescent dizziness made her stagger back a pace or two: but recovering herself even before the rude hands of Grumley were stretched forth to sustain her, the maiden ascended with a firm step into the dock.

And now the marks of sympathy which she had already received outside were renewed within; and several persons present were moved to tears at the contemplation of that sweetly interesting young creature—so mild and innocent in looks, so touchingly beautiful, and so modest in demeanour—accused of a crime totally incompatible with her seemingly gentle nature!

Near the magistrate the Hon. Arthur Eaton was seated. A profound melancholy sate like a sombre shadow upon the countenance of the young man; and the moment that Rose Foster was conducted into the Court, he fixed upon her a long, searching, penetrating look, as if to fathom the innermost recesses of her soul. Then bewildered and baffled—not knowing how to believe her guilty, yet not daring to give his own convictions the lie by pronouncing her innocent—full of uncertainty and of grief—pained and anguished at the idea that so much turpitude was possibly concealed by an equally consummate hypocrisy—Arthur Eaton withdrew his eyes from the pale countenance on which dwelt all the serenity of conscious virtue!

In a little box or pew on the right hand of the magistrate, sate a barrister dressed in his wig and gown. He was a short, thin, pale-faced man, with hatchet features, compressed lips, and keen searching eyes which went wandering restlessly about the Court, but appeared to settle for an instant upon every countenance one after another. This was Counsellor Sharply, one of the most noted Old Bailey barristers, and whom Mr. Grumley had lost no time in engaging the instant he had received the five hundred guineas from Mrs. Brace. Not that Mr. Grumley had any particular instructions to give Counsellor Sharply in the matter: but he had told the learned gentleman to watch the case narrowly—a general hint that he was to throw as much discredit upon the prosecution as possible.

And now the proceedings commenced by the magistrate inquiring the name of the prisoner.

"Your worship," said Counsellor Sharply, rising and bowing politely to the bench, "I appear for Miss Rose Foster, the young lady who has the misfortune to stand before you."

"Her name is Rose Foster, then?" observed the magistrate, inquiringly.

"That is her name, your worship," responded the barrister: "and I may add that she has been for some weeks in the service of Mrs. Brace, the well-known and highly respectable milliner of Pall Mall. This lady—who, by the way, enjoys the patronage of all the aristocracy—has entrusted me with the de-

ence of Miss Foster: for Mrs. Brace is well assured that there must be some fearful mistake in the charge so far as it applies to the young lady whom your worship will presently release from custody."

This address was delivered with the insinuating smile which gentlemen of the long robe so well know how to assume at times; and the magistrate nodded once or twice, as much as to say, "Well, I daresay it will be so: but we shall see."

"I should like to state, your worship," observed Mr. Grumley, in his hoarse bassoon voice, "that what Counsellor Sharply says is perfectly correct. I made inquiries down in Pall Mall just now—and Mrs. Brace assured me that a better young gal or one less likely to do wrong, never broke bread. Mrs. Brace is a highly respectable lady, your worship, and will come for'ard if required to speak to the prisoner's character."

"Very well, Mr. Grumley," said the magistrate: "we shall see all about that presently. Now let us hear the charge."

The Hon. Arthur Eaton stood up and immediately responded to his name, which was called by the clerk. He deposed as follows:—

"It was about eight o'clock last evening that I proceeded to visit certain buildings which are in progress of construction near Barnsbury Park, on the northern outskirt of London. I was accompanied by my valet, William Dudley. The workmen had previously left—and we were alone, or fancied ourselves to be alone, on the premises. Dudley lighted a lantern, by the aid of which we inspected all that had been done to the edifice since the preceding night. There is a small court-yard in the centre, from which four passages branch off. We were walking along one of these passages, when I took the lantern from Dudley's hand and paused a moment to examine something that had struck me to be a defect in the wall. Dudley continued advancing in front; and he had just entered the court-yard, when a cry burst from his lips—and he fell down heavily. I rushed forward—and at the very same moment that I thus bounded into the yard by one passage, I caught a glimpse of a female dressed in black plunging into another passage on the opposite side. I did not pursue her because I was struck motionless by the horrible spectacle which met my eyes. William Dudley lay a corpse at my feet! For nearly a minute I must have remained spell-bound—speechless, paralysed, transfixed with dread horror. At length the very excess of anguish forced me into motion: my limbs were unlocked—my tongue became unloosened. Raising the cry of '*Murder*,' I fell upon my knees by the side of the bleeding victim—and I know not how long a period elapsed, but certainly not many minutes, ere some labourers appeared dragging in a female dressed in black. The instant that I caught sight of the mourning garments and heard her screams, I naturally concluded that she was the murderess; and I believe that I said so at the time."

"But you did not catch a glimpse of the face of the female figure whom you saw flitting away from the scene of the murder?" exclaimed Counsellor Sharply.

"No—I saw not the face then," exclaimed Eaton.

"And you cannot swear that the female figure seen in the first instance, was the prisoner at the bar?"

"That would be swearing to the effect that I know beyond all doubt that the prisoner at the bar is the murderess," replied Eaton: "whereas I should be sorry to make an averment half so positive. And I beg you to believe," he added emphatically, "that I sincerely — ardently — unfeignedly hope her innocence will transpire."

"No doubt it will," exclaimed Counsellor Sharply: though at the moment he did not precisely see how such a consummation was to be reached—for the evidence was certainly of a most damnatory nature against his client.

He then proceeded to cross-question Mr. Eaton, who frankly admitted that he knew of no possible reason which could induce the prisoner to assassinate his valet. It evidently was not for the sake of plunder; inasmuch as the murderess must have seen him (Eaton) inside the passage with the lantern in his hand, at the instant she struck the blow; and consequently she was well aware when striking it, that she must save herself by flight the moment afterwards and could not remain to rifle her victim. Mr. Eaton likewise stated that Miss Foster was a total stranger to him; nor had he ever heard her name mentioned by William Dudley, much less seen them together.

One of the labourers who had arrested Rose was then examined; and he stated the circumstances under which he and his companions had been induced to detain her.

Mr. Counsellor Sharply now elicited the important fact that whereas it was by a passage running in a *northern* direction from the court-yard that Mr. Eaton had seen the female figure disappear, it was on the *southern* side of the building that Rose Foster was flying so precipitately when she was encountered and captured by the labourers.

A surgeon who had examined the body of the deceased was now summoned; and he described the nature of the wound which had caused his death. He likewise produced the weapon with which the fatal deed was accomplished, and he declared that the blow must have been inflicted by an arm that was either endowed with great strength, or else nerved at the moment by the most malignant passions.

At this declaration all eyes were turned upon Rose Foster—and every one felt how inconsistent the black deed was with the ingenuousness stamped upon that sweet pensive countenance, and how incompatable was its violence with the grace and lightness of that rounded arm!

"Hand me the weapon, if you please, sir," said Counsellor Sharply to the surgeon.

This demand was instantaneously complied with; and the barrister observed that it was a large clasp-knife originally provided with two blades, but one of which had been broken close off at the haft. The other, which had inflicted the death-wound, was about six inches long, pointed like a dagger, and sharp as a razor.

While turning this weapon over and over in his hand, and affecting to regard it with the closest scrutiny, though in reality only gaining time to rack his imagination what question to ask next, the Counsellor suddenly observed something on the handle which induced him to ask for a towel and some water. These were speedily brought; and in the midst of a breathless silence, did he with his own hand wash away the blood that was encrusted upon the buck-horn handle of the knife. Then, having examined it with a real attention, he whispered

something to Mr. Peter Grumley, who in his turn scrutinized the knife with a vivid keenness of look; and his man Mobbs was next admitted to this consultation, the nature of which, although it took place in open court, was still confined to the three persons who were engaged in it.

Mobbs shook his head knowingly — Grumley whispered to the Counsellor—and the learned gentleman himself, drawing his gown over his shoulders with a very important air, addressed the magistrate in the following terms:—

"From something which has transpired, your worship, and which it will be inconvenient to mention at this stage of the proceedings, I have to request that the examination be postponed for about a couple of hours. It is now two o'clock; and if your worship would not object to take the case again at four——"

"I can have no objection to accede to the learned gentleman's request," observed the magistrate.

Counsellor Sharply then looked significantly at Grumley and Mobbs, both of whom disappeared immediately from the Police-Office.

"Now," exclaimed the learned gentleman, wrapping up the knife in a piece of brief-paper, "I have to request your worship to retain this weapon locked up in your desk until the renewal of the examination."

This demand was likewise acceded to; and the counsellor then wrote a few words upon a slip of paper, which he folded carefully and handed to the magistrate. This functionary read its contents with evident surprise, and for a few moments appeared uncertain how to act. Meantime Rose Foster and all the spectators were gazing upon him with the most breathless suspense and even torturing interest: for it was quite clear that some incident of vital importance had developed itself in favour of the young and beautiful accused.

"If your worship hesitates," said Counsellor Sharply, in a determined but respectful tone, "I shall make the demand not only aloud, but in a far more formal manner."

"Perhaps *this* proceeding will be the best, Mr. Sharply," observed the magistrate, glancing significantly at the paper; "and I accordingly act in compliance with your wishes."

Then, without any farther hesitation, he handed the slip to the Hon. Arthur Eaton, who appeared perfectly wonder-stricken by its contents. The colour went and came with extraordinary rapidity upon his cheeks; and when he endeavoured to speak, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. At length he found words to express his feelings; and, starting from his seat, he exclaimed, "I protest with indignation——"

"Silence, sir—the case is adjourned—clear the Court!" cried the magistrate.

"Clear the Court!" shouted the usher; and the half-dozen constables and runners lurking about began to bundle the spectators out of the place, so that the din thus created entirely drowned the words of Arthur Eaton, who was continuing to address the magistrate and Counsellor Sharply in an animated and excited manner.

Rose Foster was removed from the dock and conducted to a private room, where she found Mrs. Brace seated before the fire, weeping bitterly.

The young maiden started back on recognising the milliner: but remembering certain assurances which had been conveyed to her by Mr. Grumley, she advanced towards the woman through whose agency she had experienced so much persecution and misery. But Mrs. Brace caught her in her arms, and straining her vehemently to her bosom, murmured, "Pardon me, dear Rose—pardon me, for all that I have done!"

"Ah! madam, I am not vindictive," said the young girl, bursting into tears: "and if you are really sorry for everything you have made me suffer——"

"I am—I am—my God! believe that I am!" cried the milliner, shedding her crocodile torrents over the generous maiden who was confiding and unsophisticated enough, despite all her bitter experience, to put faith in the professed sincerity of the vile woman's compunction.

"Then do I pardon you, Mrs. Brace—yes, with a true Christian forgiveness," said Rose. "And I even feel bound to express my gratitude towards you for interesting yourself in my behalf this day—likewise for the assurances you sent me by the constable——"

"What did he tell you, my love?" demanded Mrs. Brace. "Let me know all he said, that I may see whether he delivered my message properly and completely."

"He told me that yourself and the Prince had paid him a very large sum of money to take my cause in hand and make my innocence transpire," said Rose; "and that yourself and his Royal Highness were well satisfied that I *am* innocent. He moreover advised me to leave everything to the barrister whom he had retained in my behalf, and besought me to spare the Prince and *you* in any statement that I might unavoidably be called upon to make in order to account for my wandering abroad last night. He added that my innocence was sure to be rendered apparent, and that on being discharged he was authorised to give me a hundred guineas on your behalf, and either recommend me to some respectable family or see me safe off by coach to any country place whither I might choose to repair. This was the sum of the communications made to me by the tall stout constable."

"And you may perceive, my dear Rose," observed Mrs. Brace, "that the Prince and myself are deeply penitent for all we have caused you to undergo. You have forgiven me as a Christian—I dare not ask you to look upon me again as a friend. Nevertheless, I will act as one towards you; and please God that your innocence becomes manifest to-day——"

"Oh! is there any doubt of it?—can there be any uncertainty in the case?" exclaimed Rose, suddenly alarmed by the milliner's observation. "What means this prorogation of the hearing?—what meant all that mystery respecting the knife?—and what was the reason that Mr. Eaton became so powerfully affected at the end of the proceedings?"

"You forget, my love," answered Mrs. Brace, "that I have not been present at the examination. I have been waiting here in the cruellest suspense—and in tears, as you found me. All I know is that something important suddenly transpired in your favour, and that the renewal of the investigation promises to be characterised by the most vivid, startling, and thrilling interest."

"Alas! alas! if circumstantial evidence should prevail against me?" murmured Rose, clasping her hands convulsively at the bare idea of being consigned to that gaol which bears a name that makes even the innocent tremble—the name of Newgate!

"Do not give way to despondency, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace, in so soothing a tone and lavishing such tender caresses at the same time, that the poor orphan girl not only forgave her from her heart for the past, but felt comforted and cheered by the maternal affection displayed with so much apparent warmth towards her.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

A MAGNANIMOUS WOMAN.

While the preceding incidents were occurring at the Police-Office in Bow Street, a scene which we must interrupt our narrative to describe was taking place at Carlton House.

For it was a little after twelve at noon on this memorable day, and the Prince had just achieved his morning toilette, when he was startled by a knock at the door leading to the private staircase.

Dismissing Germain, his Royal Highness hastened to answer the summons; and the Amazon entered the magnificent apartment.

"Ah! my sweet and mysterious visitress of the dark hours!" ejaculated the heir-apparent: but he stopped short suddenly—for the handsome countenance of the lady wore an expression of severity verging upon sternness, and she made an impatient gesture as much as to imply that she was in no humour for jocularity.

The Prince closed the door,—and drawing himself haughtily up to his full height, he said, "May I ask what has procured me the honour of this *second* visit from Lady Lade within a few hours, and what is the reason that she wears a gloomy aspect?"

"Has your Royal Highness nothing wherewith to reproach yourself?" demanded the Amazon, fixing her large dark eyes full upon him.

"Doubtless I am culpable of many small vices, in which, if I recollect, your ladyship has borne a share," responded the Prince, now assuming a tone of irony: "once in yonder bath-room—and last night——"

"Oh! you may affect satire to your heart's content, Prince!" exclaimed the huntress, her splendid countenance becoming crimson with indignation. "But permit me to inquire whether that latter weakness on my part to which you allude—I mean my visit to this chamber last night—engendered any misgiving in your mind?"

"In good sooth, my sweet friend," said the Prince, still maintaining an ironical tone in revenge for the proud bearing and severe looks assumed by the Amazon,—"in good sooth, I *was* inspired with some partial misgiving and vague suspicion of a sinister purpose on your side,—not, however, by the circumstance of your kind visit of love and pleasure—but by the mystery attending your disappearance."

"And the brandy which we drank together?" said the huntress, now smiling with malicious archness.

"Ah! by Jove—I remember!" exclaimed the Prince, starting uneasily. "Come, my dear Letitia," he continued, suddenly assuming a conciliatory tone and manner,—"tell me what is the meaning of this change in your aspect towards me, and how I have offended you? For that there is something wrong——"

"You are well aware," added Lady Letitia, finishing the sentence for him. "Well, it is useless to bandy words in this manner;—and therefore I will at once confess that I had a special and sinister purpose in visiting your Royal Highness during the past night—and that purpose I accomplished!"

"Yes—you became my bed-fellow——" began the Prince, unable to suppress a sneer.

"A truce to flippancy!" exclaimed the huntress. "This matter is serious—and your Royal Highness beholds before you a woman who is as strong in her resolution to work out a settled plan, as she is frail and yielding in the school of love. In a word, then, I have vowed to effect the restoration of Meagles—or at least to avenge him!"

"Ah! it is as I more than half feared," muttered the Prince, changing colour: then, fixing upon the Amazon a look full of that fiendish malignity which formed no inconsiderable element of his disposition, he said, "Beware how you wage war against *me*, Letitia—for I will crush you as if you were a worm."

"I defy you—by heaven! I defy you!" exclaimed the huntress, her eyes filling with a more than usual radiancy, her countenance becoming of the richest carnation, and her splendid bust swelling so proudly that it threatened to burst through the tightly-fitting frock which developed while it concealed those grand and voluptuous contours. "Nay—look not so black upon me—your brow may lower with storms—but your eyes shoot forth no lightnings that kill! For once you have to deal with a woman who will fight you with any weapons that you choose to name. Shall it be swords or pistols? Oh! no—no—the courage of your Royal Highness cannot be screwed up to such a pitch," said the Amazon, accenting her words with a cutting bitterness. "Shall it be treachery and intrigue? Ah! there you are more proficient and likewise more daring—because snakes creep out of sight, through the long grass, and then insidiously sting their victims!"

"By the living God! I will not endure this insulting language," exclaimed the Prince, becoming purple in the face. "Depart, woman—or I will summon my lacqueys to thrust you ignominiously forth!"

"Dare to call a single domestic hither," said the Amazon, in a calm but determined tone, "and I will horsewhip him as soundly as I will presently thrash your Royal Highness if you dare to menace me with such insolence again. For mark me—and tremble," she exclaimed with a strong emphasis: then, after a few moments' pause, during which she kept her eyes dauntlessly and defiantly fixed upon the Prince, she added, "You are in my power—completely in my power!"

The royal voluptuary trembled from head to foot with a rage to which he dared not give vent; for he saw that there was a sternness of purpose on the part of the Amazon which must be well backed by a consciousness of possessing that power which she proclaimed herself to hold in terror over him.

"Now listen to me with attention," she said; "and see whether I have been putting forth idle vapourings and empty boastings. Last night I visited your chamber with a special object in view—and to gain that object I prostituted myself to your embraces which were loathsome to me. But

it was necessary to my plan that I should send you into a deep slumber—and I became your bed-fellow in order to obtain an opportunity of practising that cajolery which would induce you to drink from the glass that I had drugged beforehand."

"But this was the foulest treachery—the most damnable perfidy that woman ever practised!" exclaimed the Prince, casting looks of demoniac hatred upon the Amazon.

"Not worse than the treachery and the perfidy which your Royal Highness practised towards the man who had been so good a friend to you," returned the huntress, her coral lips thus shooting forth the sharpest arrows. "But now shall you learn the purpose which I had in view last night; and this explanation will afford the key to that mystery which places you in my power. In a word, then, Prince of Wales, I have possessed myself of your most secret, most valuable papers!"

His Royal Highness staggered back as if suddenly struck with the sharp blow of a hammer: for all the fearful truth broke upon him in an instant—and he saw that he was indeed in the power of a woman who was not likely to surrender up the surreptitiously-acquired talisman of her influence until all her objects were fully accomplished.

"Listen again," she resumed, after a short pause, —"and I will tell how I discovered that it was *you* through whose agency poor Meagles was sent out of the country. The other morning his landlady received a letter stating in concise terms that he had been detected in treasonable designs against the Sovereign, but that through the leniency of the paternal Government he was permitted to repair without delay to North America, on condition that he never again returned to his native land. This letter was shown to me; and I instantly saw therein the evidences of some infernal treachery. But my suspicions did not at once fall upon your Royal Highness: on the contrary, I rather fancied that it was some device of your despotic father the King, to rob you of the services of a man who was so faithful and so devoted. But when I learnt that on the very same day when Meagles disappeared, your valet Germain had been to his lodgings—had remained there for a short time—and had then taken his departure, with some frivolous excuse,—it struck me like an inspiration that there was something wrong. My suspicions were thus directed into the right channel; and on examining Meagles' writing-desk, I saw enough to convince me that some one had been there already. It was not *then* very difficult to put two and two together; and I resolved to take up my friend's cause with even a more zealous championship than if it were my own. The campaign has been opened—it commenced last night—and the advantage remains to me. By a little stratagem, a great object was achieved. The papers—those valuable, those important papers —are in my possession; and I am now here to dictate my own terms to *you*—the discomfitted, the defeated, the humiliated enemy."

"Meagles deserved all that has happened to him," said the Prince, in a thick hoarse voice and with a dogged manner: "for he stole the papers from me in the first instance—and it was by their aid that you and he overawed my father."

"We will not dispute upon the point," responded the Amazon, calmly and resolutely. "Suffice it for *my* purpose and for *you* to know that the papers are *now* in my hands. Yes—the Lightfoot certificate which proves your father to be a perjured miscreant and a cold-blooded traitor to a young, lovely, and confiding woman whose heart he doubtless broke——"

"Calumniate not your King!" exclaimed the Prince, trembling with rage.

"Then the documents proving your own marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert," continued the Amazon, heedless of the interruption,—"a marriage which, if proclaimed to the public, would lose you the crown that you hope to wear——"

"Ah! do you dare menace me?" cried the Prince, clenching his fists and grinding his teeth.

"Then the correspondence which shows that this same Mrs. Fitzherbert—your own wife," proceeded the remorseless Amazon,—"became the paramour of the Marquis of Bellois—the mother of a child, too——"

"Fiend!—devil!—demoness!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, stamping his feet with fury and extending his arms menacingly towards the huntress.

"Rage on—rage on—I defy you!" she exclaimed; and her musical laugh rang through the chamber.

"The papers—you have them about your person —yes the plunder is concealed beneath your garments!" cried the Prince, in a hoarse thick voice and in broken sentences. "But, by the eternal God! I will tear them from you—I will rend your garments to shreds—I will murder you, sooner than let you escape me!"

And with a species of savage yell, such as a hyena sends forth when goaded into fury, he sprang towards the huntress.

But, nimble and agile as the young fawn in the forest, the lady darted aside; and at the same moment a bright dagger which she drew from the bosom of her frock-coat gleamed across the eyes of the Prince.

"Touch me—and I strike!" she exclaimed, her handsome countenance suddenly expressing an implacable sternness.

For nearly a minute his Royal Highness stood gazing upon her, uncertain how to act. His white and quivering lips denoted the fell passions of the malignant coward: for he could have found it in his heart to murder her then and there, had he not dreaded to encounter the sharp poniard which the Amazon displayed so suddenly.

"It is useless for us to quarrel thus, Letitia," he said at length: "let us come to terms."

"Yes—but I must dictate them," was the response.

"Put up your weapon, and we will look the matter calmly in the face," cried the Prince.

"Oh! I am not afraid to give you even the chance of falling upon me unawares," exclaimed the Amazon, as she returned the dagger to its sheathe in the bosom of her garment.

"Do you take me for an assassin?" demanded his Royal Highness, flinging upon her a ferocious look.

"Since you ask me the question," replied the huntress coolly, "I will candidly confess that there are no crimes of which I deem you to be incapable."

The Prince bit his lip till the blood stained his teeth. Oh! if he could only have rung the bell and given that woman into custody,—if he could only have sent her after Meagles across the seas! But no—he dared not: for the papers which she possessed contained secrets involving his honour and

his heirship to the crown! He was therefore compelled to smother his rancour—stifle his hatred—eat the words that rose to his lips—and swallow the retorts which his indignation prompted! And this was a terrible, terrible humiliation for the first gentleman in Europe to endure!

"Let us keep to the point immediately before us," he said, after a long pause. "The terms upon which you will surrender the papers—*all* the papers without reserve——"

"Those terms are easily dictated," interrupted the Amazon. "In the first place, Mr. Meagles must be restored to his country and his friends."

"I will procure an order from the Minister to that effect," said the Prince.

"I would not trust the Government a whit more than I will you," rejoined Lady Lade. "Bad Kings and Princes make bad Ministers—and such is now the case in this wretched country."

"Well—Meagles shall be restored," said his Royal Highness, again biting his lip to restrain the wrath that cost him such severe struggles to prevent it from boiling over.

"Meagles shall be restored, you say? Good! *That* is the first point. The *second*," continued the Amazon, "is that he be raised to the peerage on the day of your marriage with Caroline of Brunswick; and that a pension of five thousand a-year be settled upon him at the same time."

"Letitia, you are mad!" exclaimed the Prince, now more amazed than even angry.

"Well—if you are afraid to ask your royal father for those boons," said the huntress coolly, "I must repair to Windsor myself. It will not be the first time that I shall have demanded of his Majesty a peerage and a pension for some one on your behalf; and provided with such important documents, it is not likely that the King will refuse my prayer."

"No—no—you need not visit Windsor a second time," exclaimed the Prince. "Come—I assent to the second condition — a peerage and pension for Meagles on my wedding-day. And that is all, I hope?"

"Yes—I have nothing more to stipulate," answered the Amazon. "But I may as well inform your Royal Highness that the papers are *not* about my person—nor are they accessible to you! Well concealed are they now—and well concealed will they remain, until the fulfilment of the conditions just laid down. You may employ bravos to waylay and murder me: but my death would not give you back your papers. On the contrary, they would fall into the hands of persons less scrupulous than I —and instead of reaping any advantage from the crime, your ruin would ensue. I give you this warning, because I am fully aware that the idea of sending me to an eternal sleep has flashed through your brain more than once during the last quarter of an hour. You will therefore now do so at your peril."

Thus speaking, the Amazon turned away and moved towards the private door—while his Royal Highness, astounded at the fact of her having read his thoughts so easily, remained transfixed and petrified with horror and amazement.

"By the by," she said, stopping short and looking over her shoulder, "there must be a period fixed for the fulfilment of the conditions just settled between us. The matter can't go on for everlasting, you know. I suppose that poor Meagles has been hurried off to America in a ship-of-war? The people of England have to support navies in order that they may become instruments of oppression against themselves! God's curse will light upon such a *paternal Government!*" she added bitterly. "But that is not the point. We were talking of Meagles—and you will do well to have a fast-sailing vessel sent after him: for I accord six weeks, and no more, for the fulfilment of our terms. If that interval elapses without seeing Meagles return, then will I publish the papers. Farewell!"

And having thus spoken, the magnanimous huntress quitted the royal apartment—leaving the Prince of Wales more humiliated, more disgusted with himself and all the world, and more disposed to abandon himself to despair than ever he had been before. Indeed, to tell the full truth, he was just in that humour when for a cup of the waters of oblivion he would have sold his soul to Satan!

CHAPTER CXXV.

THE WORKING MAN'S WIFE AND CHILDREN.

AND now we have another scene to relate, which occurred contemporaneously with those described in the two preceding chapters, and to which we must direct attention ere we can return to the Police-Office and resume the adventures of Rose Foster.

For while she was standing in the dock soon after twelve on this memorable day, — and while the Amazon was exhibiting the magnanimous heroism of her character to the Prince of Wales,—a sad and pitiable spectacle might have been seen in that garret where the wife and children of Melmoth the Working Man were huddling together.

But the working man himself was not there! The letter which he had written, and which was in the same style as that penned by Meagles, had been duly received by the unhappy woman, to whose heart it had appeared to carry the blight of death! For now did she feel herself widowed—now did she look upon her children as fatherless;—and, in addition to this appalling misery, was the crushing idea that *he*—the man whom she loved so fondly,—*he*, the husband of herself and the father of her children,—that *he* was plunged into the bitterest, deepest despair!

Oh! as that poor woman pressed her babe to her breast and cast round her eyes upon the other three children who sat near her looking up into her worn countenance as if seeking for consolation there, but finding all a hopeless blank or else the sombre gloom of despair,—as she thus threw her hot and tearless eyes around and at a glance embraced the unfortunate beings who were left dependent solely upon her,—it seemed as if her heart-strings would snap suddenly and she must sink down beneath the intolerable load of her misfortune.

A husband torn away from a sickly, dying wife!—a father from four children the eldest of whom was a mere boy and the youngest a babe at the breast! Oh! it was too much to be borne,—too much even for a strong woman to endure—and therefore enough to crush altogether that poor ailing creature who had already seen so much misery.

The reader will remember that Melmoth had robbed Meagles one night and that Meagles had subsequently bade him keep the gold, which was indeed at the time intended to relieve him. Comforts

had then been introduced to the garret; but the working-man would not remove into a better lodging for fear of absorbing his little store ere he should succeed in obtaining employment. Then it happened that he had about his person all his treasure at the moment when he became involved in the adventure which hurried him with such rapidity through the mock-trial at the Home Office—the journey to Woolwich—and the embarkation in the boat whence he plunged so desperately into the Thames on the night of pitchy darkness. But we must observe that when he had penned his brief and formal note, as dictated to him by the hirelings of despotic authorities, he had entrusted his gold together with that letter to the peace-officer who undertook to deliver both next morning in London: but the villanous messenger left the note at the proper address, and retained the money for himself. Yes—all—every farthing did the officer keep: not the smallest mite did he spare for the woman who was made as it were a widow and the children who were in like manner rendered fatherless!

And thus the few comforts which had been gathered in that garret—and the vesture which had been redeemed from pledge—all found their way back to the pawnbroker's to furnish the means of procuring bread. Woeful fate!—heart-rending and agonising was it for that poor mother to see article after article disappear, swallowed up by the ravenous maw of the monster Pauperism! And as she day by day saw the garret coming back to its recent state of misery—and her children lapsing into the shivering, shuddering chill of semi-nudity—and the landlady's looks waxing blacker and more suspicious as the weekly rent-day was approaching,—the poor creature felt that she could have lain herself down to die, had it not been necessary to live on as well and as long as she could for the sake of her children!

And now the morning had arrived when the pittance was to be paid for the garret—and it was the same day as that on which the incidents of the preceding chapters took place.

Scarcely had noon been proclaimed by all the clocks of the metropolis,—those faithful servitors of Old Time with their iron tongues,—when the sharp, ominous, expected tap at the door was heard; and Mrs. Thomas, the vixenish landlady, entered the garret.

"Well, Mrs. Melmoth, how be you to-day?" asked the woman, affecting a civil tone although she more than half suspected that she should have to change it in a minute: for the distress of the poor family was no secret to her—her lynx eyes having marked every article that was taken out by the eldest boy to pledge.

"Mrs. Thomas, I am very ill—and nearly driven to despair with misery and anguish," replied the poor woman; "and what is worse," she added, bursting into tears, "I am even unable to pay you the trifle——"

"I knowed it!" ejaculated the landlady, smacking her hand against the wall as a substitute for the table which she would have struck if there had been one there. "I am robbed as completely as if I was stopped on the highway."

"Robbed! Oh! no—no," moaned Mrs. Melmoth. "Though poor—aye, destitute—we are honest——"

"There ain't no such a thing as honesty amongst poor folks!" shrieked the landlady. "I tell you I've been robbed with my eyes hopen—and I'll prove it! Hasn't the things which should have been left for me to put the brokers in upon—hasn't they been removed under my wery nose——"

"They have—they have indeed," sobbed Mrs. Melmoth, pressing her babe to her bosom and endeavouring to calm the other children who began to cry: "but everything has been made away with to procure bread——"

"The rent should be paid first," ejaculated Mrs. Thomas. "Now what am I to tell *my* landlord when he comes and asks for *his* money—which he will do this evening—and I'm just the half-crown short——"

"Surely, my dear Mrs. Thomas," interrupted the working man's wife, "you can trust me for a few days—till something turns up——"

"Nothink won't turn up," cried the heartless vixen. "The Government is a persecuting you and your'n—and they'll hunt ye down to the dogs. But the chase shan't take place in my house, I can tell you. Besides, the tax-gatherer has already been and asked me why I keep such seditious, vickedly-disposed people beneath my roof——"

"You do not mean to turn us out?" exclaimed Mrs. Melmoth, casting a look of mingled terror and anguish upon the landlady.

"Yes, but I do though!" was the withering, blighting response. "So tramp—be off——"

"Mercy—mercy!" screamed the poor mother: "if not for me, at least for this innocent babe—and those unfortunate children——My God! mercy—mercy——"

"No—tramp—be off—out with ye!" vociferated Mrs. Thomas, working herself up into a perfect fury. "Bundle—or I'll call in a constable——"

"Come, then, my poor children—courage!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a stifling voice—for she felt as if her heart must break. "Come—let us go forth into the street—and—and——beg!"

As she uttered these last words, the poor woman staggered against the door-post and almost dropped the babe from her arms: for although she had often and often thought that to beggary her doom must lead—and although for weeks and months past, her waking reveries by day and her dreams by night had depicted herself and all her children drawn up in a ghastly, ghost-like line in the public streets stretching forth the hand of mendicity,—yet she had she never dared breathe *aloud* the awful word itself until the present occasion. But now the appalling moment had arrived—the consummation of the calamity stared her in the face—she was already standing upon the threshold of that doom which she had so long foreseen and which now made her blood stagnate as if chilled in her veins.

And forth went the unhappy family—the inhuman landlady overwhelming them with reproaches, because they were poor!

Oh! poverty is indeed a crime in this land of civilisation and of Bible Societies,—in this country where religion is made so much of that there is a law to punish with the treadmill those who do not go to church,—in this kingdom where a young lady at present reigns "by the grace of God!"

But it was in the time of that diabolical old monster George III—the mad, scrofulous, and cold-bloodedly cruel grandfather of this same young lady to whom we have just alluded,—it was in the time of that atrocious tyrant whom despicably sycophantic

historians have covered with fulsome praises, but who was a scandal and a shame to human nature as well as a scourge and a curse to the human race,—it was in his time, we say, that the working man's family turned out from their garret-home into the inclemency and houseless desolation of the open streets!

And now the oft foreshadowed doom was come at last—the long foreseen consummation was present—and the heart-broken mother of the crying, starving, shivering children found herself fated to teach them how to beg!

In Whitehall did they take their stand on this afternoon of their initiative in the arts and devices of mendicancy. But an initiative *only* was it indeed: for nature—pure, unadulterated nature—traced that profound and ineffable sorrow upon the countenance of the mother, and gave that woe-begone aspect to the children. Art was not needed there: no — O God!—no—the scene was all too true and all too natural!

Yes—in the great thoroughfare of Whitehall did Mrs. Melmoth take her stand, with the babe in her arms—the eldest boy and the girl on her right hand, and the youngest boy on her left. There—in that thoroughfare, where a King had once been so righteously put to death for making war on his people—that same King who is now falsely called a Martyr,—there was it that the working man's wife and children placed themselves to supplicate alms of the passers-by!

O Working Men of England! how many thousands —how many hundreds of thousands of ye have had your families go down into the streets to beg? Rise early—toil hard all day—eat of the scantiest and drink of the poorest the while—go to-bed late—rise early again—pass through the same wretched routine of crushing labour and semi-starvation day after day, —and what is the result? Ye cannot keep yourselves and your families from misery and wretchedness. No — destitution and then beggary or the

workhouse come at last,—and your end is either death on a dunghill, or death in an Union with the blessed certainty of a common deal coffin and a pauper's grave,—while your children are left upon the world to go through all that you have suffered —meet the same experiences—pass through the same miseries, privations, woes, and heart-breaking afflictions—and perish in the same way at last! Yes —Working Men of England! this is your doom—this is your fate! Ye who make silken textures for the indolent wealthy, are shivering in rags yourselves: ye who raise all the choicest fruits of the earth for the pampered, insolent, overbearing aristocrat, are starving yourselves!

By the living God! all this is intolerable! It is enough to make ye atheists—infidels—unbelievers; —and it assuredly is far more than sufficient to make ye Chartists, Republicans, and Communists! The appalling misery and the monstrous oppression which exist in this country try your faith in God's mercy to the very uttermost;—and if any one were to preach the doctrine that the world was naught save a huge pitiless machine, uncared for by the Almighty but abandoned to the caprices and iniquities of Satan, ye would not be blamed if, yielding to the influence of your own bitter experience, ye believed therein!

But, no!—the Working Men of England require not sophistry—much less metaphysics to account for the evils which they endure. The causes are too palpable—too glaring—too apparent;—and those causes we ourselves have proclaimed and denounced a thousand times—and shall continue to proclaim and denounce so long as there remains the smallest particle of misery in these realms! For the causes thus alluded to exist in our vitiated institutions,—and chiefly our aristocracy, with its hereditary titles and its law of primogeniture—its usurpation of all the governmental and administrative powers of the State—its heartless tyranny and its cold-blooded avarice—its voluptuousness and luxury, maintained at the expense of starving millions and wide-spread injustice—its diabolical despotism and its insatiable rapacity!

But we had almost forgotten that poor family whom we have just seen turned out into the streets —turned out to beg, or starve!

Carriages—splendid equipages—rolled by; and the poor woman said to herself in the blackness of her despair, "What have the children of that lady done that they should ride in so fine a coach, while mine are shivering and starving here!"

"Mother," whispered the eldest boy—and he pointed to his little sister, who had sunk down exhausted upon the cold pavement.

"O God! that we were all dead—that we were all dead!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a low tone, but with a concentrated bitterness such as she had never experienced nor displayed before: and, giving the babe to the eldest boy, she took up the little girl—pressed the poor child to her bosom—and covered her wan, thin face with kisses.

Oh! that was indeed a scene of misery—misery —misery! And here must we leave for the present the unfortunate woman with her starving children, —yes—leave them there—in the open street—houseless, penniless, foodless—as so many, many thousands of the British Working Men's families are at all times houseless, penniless, foodless!

CHAPTER CXXVI.

WHO IS THE CULPRIT?

PUNCTUALLY at four o'clock on this day of many and startling incidents, the case of Rose Foster was called on again at the Police-Office in Bow Street; and the young girl once more entered the dock with a firm step. Her countenance was composed, though very pale: but a slight tint of the rose appeared softly on that colourless purity of the lily, as she received an encouraging look from Counsellor Sharply as he entered the little box or pew on the right hand side of the magistrate. For in that rapid and only just perceptible glance, the orphan read a certain satisfaction on the part of the barrister which convinced her that *he* entertained a good opinion of her case; and thus to a soul already fortified by conscious innocence was the anodyne of hope imparted—that hope which resembles the dew that falls so gently, so silently, and yet so refreshingly upon the withering, half-blighted flower!

The look which Rose threw timidly round the court, showed her that it was as densely crowded as in the earlier part of the day: but two circumstances instantaneously struck her as significant,—for in such a situation the veriest trifle assumes an importance which on ordinary occasions would be totally overlooked. The first was that Arthur Eaton no longer enjoyed the distinction of occupying a seat near the magistrate, but was placed in the body of the court, between the dock and the bench;—and the other circumstance above alluded to was that neither Mr. Peter Grumley nor his factotum Mobbs were present.

"What course are you now about to pursue, Mr. Sharply?" inquired the magistrate, by way of re-opening the proceedings.

"I purpose to begin by asking the Hon. Mr. Eaton a few questions," said the learned gentleman, rising from his seat and drawing his gown over his shoulders.

"Do you wish me to enter the witness-box, sir?" demanded Arthur, whose manner was marked by a peculiarity which failed not to strike every one present: for there was a restless glitter in his eyes accompanied by a nervous quivering of the lips and an agitation of the entire being, which, coupled with the mysterious turn that the proceedings had appeared to take at the first examination, began to excite strange and startling suspicions in the minds of the spectators.

"No, sir—I do *not* wish you to enter *this* box," said Counsellor Sharply, with that significancy, or rather semi-sarcasm and covert irony in which barristers are so prone to indulge: "you can remain where you are—*at least for the present*," added the learned gentleman, with a deeper meaning, as he glanced encouragingly at Rose Foster.

But it was almost with a feeling of alarm that the young girl caught this look and comprehended its purport: for, when considered in connexion with the mysterious observations in which the Counsellor had been indulging, it appeared as if he meant to intimate the probability that Mr. Eaton would speedily change places with herself. And Rose was alarmed, because although she was deeply, deeply anxious that her own innocence should transpire, she

rapidly taking, her emotions of joy for herself and sorrow for Arthur Eaton swelled into a tide that broke down the barrier of her fortitude and found its vent in a flood of copious weeping.

"Compose yourself — my dear child — compose yourself," said a familiar voice; and, raising her head abruptly, Rose found that Mrs. Brace was by her side in the dock.

At this moment Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs entered the court; and going straight up to Counsellor Sharply, they whispered earnestly with that learned gentleman for a few minutes.

"A presentiment tells me that you will not be many more minutes here," said the milliner, in a low tone of touching tenderness admirably assumed.

Rose cast a glance of deep gratitude upon Mrs. Brace for that assurance; and the milliner, unprincipled and profligate as she was, felt a pang of remorse pass poignantly through her bosom as she remembered all the persecution, misery, and suffering which the poor orphan had experienced at her hands.

"Has anything new transpired?" demanded the magistrate, addressing himself to Mr. Counsellor Sharply, who had just desisted from whispering to the two police-constables.

"Yes, your worship—and something of the highest importance," responded the learned gentleman.

Once more did a breathless silence and a sensation of painful suspense pervade the court.

"Proceed with your evidence, Mr. Sharply," said the magistrate.

"I call Peter Grumley to the witness-box," exclaimed the barrister, the expression of whose countenance was most mysteriously knowing.

And Mr. Grumley, having entered the box, was duly sworn to the effect that the evidence he was about to give to the Court should be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God!

When this ceremony was accomplished, a stillness deep as that which follows a terrific rolling of thunder, once more reigned in the Police-Office; and inasmuch as the gentlemen of the long robe are amazingly fond of those proceedings the phases of which produce grand effects, Mr. Counsellor Sharply suffered at least a minute to elapse ere he chose to disturb a silence which in reality was characterised by an awe-inspiring solemnity.

At length he drew his gown over his shoulders, and addressing Peter Grumley, said, "I believe you have been somewhere during the interval of the adjournment which just now took place?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Leastways me and my man Mobbs has been somevheres——"

"And whither have you been?" was the next leading question.

"To Lord Marchmont's House in Hanover Square," answered Grumley.

"What did you do there?"

"I searched the room which used to be occupied by the deceased William Dudley, and also the chamber belonging to the Hon. Mr. Eaton."

"But I believe you found nothing of any consequence in the former apartment?" said Mr. Sharply.

"No, sir—nothing," was the response.

"And in the latter—that is to say the bed-chamber occupied by the Hon. Mr. Eaton——"

"I found something *there*—in a chest of drawers——"

"Well — what was it?" demanded Counsellor Sharply.

"This blade of a knife," returned Grumley, producing the object mentioned.

The usher took it and handed it up to the magistrate, who immediately applied it to the knife which lay before him. It fitted exactly, and was evidently the blade which had been broken off from that knife!

A murmur of astonishment and horror ran through the Court: for now that circumstantial evidence pointed to Arthur Eaton as being beyond all possibility of doubt the murderer of William Dudley, the more subdued feelings that were previously attendant on the mere suspicion, became enhanced into a boundless wonder and an immense abhorrence,—wonder that such an ingenuous-looking young man could be so great a criminal—and abhorrence not only at the deed itself, but at the base attempt which had apparently been made to shift the burden and the responsibility of the guilt upon the shoulders of an innocent young girl.

"You are safe, my dear child," whispered the milliner with a triumphant accent in the ears of Rose Foster.

"God be thanked!" murmured the orphan, clasping her hands fervently. "But that gentleman—— Oh! that such wickedness should exist in the human heart——"

"Hush!" whispered Mrs. Brace: "he is going to speak!"

"Your worship will be pleased to hear me for a few moments," said Arthur Eaton, now recovering the faculty of speech which he had lost for nearly a minute when the last overwhelming incident had completed the chain of circumstantial evidence against him.

"I should certainly advise you to reserve your defence, Mr. Eaton," observed the magistrate, with an ominous significance.

"My defence!" ejaculated the young gentleman. "What am I to understand by those words?" he demanded, with mingled hauteur and indignation.

"I will explain myself more fully, sir," said the magistrate, in a stern tone and in a severe manner. "But in the first place, with regard to the young person still standing in the dock, I must declare that the evidence against her has not only totally failed, but that she is entitled to the deepest sympathy for having even for a moment been compelled to endure the anxiety, torture, and ignominy of a position in which she never ought to have been placed."

These words were greeted with an outburst of applause on the part of the spectators; while Rose, overcome by her feelings, fell weeping and sobbing convulsively into the arms of Mrs. Brace.

"I therefore," continued the magistrate, "have unfeigned pleasure in directing Miss Foster to leave the dock; and I assure her that in thus pronouncing her discharge, not a shadow of suspicion remains in my mind concerning her."

"No one is more delighted than myself at this acquittal of the young lady," exclaimed Arthur Eaton, with a generous frankness of manner which of course passed as the rankest and vilest hypocrisy with all present: then, haughtily indifferent to the sneers which curled the lips of those countenances that met his eyes, he added, "And I heartily beg Miss Foster's forgiveness for having in any way been instrumental in causing her the inconvenience

anxiety, and annoyance which she must have suffered."

But Rose heard him not: for, so overcome was she by her own feelings on finding her innocence so fully proven and hearing it so unequivocally proclaimed, that Mrs. Brace was compelled to lead her out of the Court into that private room where their former interview of this memorable day had taken place.

"Silence!" exclaimed the usher, the moment the door had closed behind the orphan girl and the milliner.

Arthur Eaton, who had been about to address the magistrate when this summons was made, folded his arms and remained silent; but the air of conscious innocence which he wore was interpreted by the spectators as the hardihood of a desperate criminality aided by a consummate hypocrisy.

"I must now recapitulate," said the magistrate, "certain points in the evidence which has been adduced in this case. In the first instance, Mr. Eaton declared that at the moment when Dudley fell, he rushed forward and caught a glimpse of a lady in black darting into a passage opposite. Now this was a passage running due north; and it was completely on the southern side of the building that Miss Foster was immediately afterwards captured. The next fact which I must notice is that the deceased was evidently murdered by means of a knife belonging to himself, and of which no stranger was likely to obtain possession. But then comes a still more grave, important, and serious circumstance: for the very blade which belonged to this knife and which was broken off, is found in Mr. Eaton's apartment. With such evidence before me, I have only one course to adopt—which is to declare that you, Arthur Eaton, do stand committed to his Majesty's prison of Newgate to take your trial at the ensuing Sessions, on the charge of murder."

"I can only say to your worship," spoke Eaton, in a firm and resolute voice, "that I am innocent of this foul deed which is imputed to me,—as innocent as I *now* firmly believe that young girl to be whom you have just discharged from the dock. That a tremendous mass of circumstantial evidence has accumulated against me, I readily admit: but there is a key to the reading of this terrible mystery—a clue to the unravelling of this skein of incidents, at present so tangled and so complicated. That is however *my* secret for the present: useless and unavailing were it to enter upon any explanations at this moment or in this place. No—for a more solemn occasion and a higher tribunal shall be reserved a narrative the details of which will cause every heart to thrill with horror throughout the land, and turn into sympathy and commiseration the loathing and abhorrence which in the meantime may attach unto me. I have now no more to say: your worship has resolved upon committing me for trial—and I am forced to bow to that decision."

Having thus spoken in a firm and manly tone, the Hon. Arthur Eaton resigned himself to the constables who stood ready to lead him away from the Police-Office; and as he traversed the crowd which opened to afford him and the officers room to pass, he was astonished to perceive that those looks which had so recently surveyed him with horror and aversion, now contemplated him with a mournful interest and a sorrowful compassion.

"They are already convinced of my innocence," he thought within himself: and, his eyes filling with tears, he threw glances of mute but eloquent gratitude around him.

"Poor fellow!" whispered one individual to another.

"Yes—it is as you say," was the response given by the person thus addressed. "He is decidedly mad——"

"A monomaniac——"

"And his mania is *murder!*"

These remarks, rapidly exchanged in a low tone, were by no means intended to be overheard by the Hon. Arthur Eaton: they nevertheless met his ears—and striking with an almost overwhelming violence upon his brain, they produced a shock which made him reel and stagger as if he were about to fall.

But the constables sustained him with their vigorous arms: and as they hurried him out of the Office, the last words that fell upon his ears were—*"Poor fellow! he is a monomaniac!"*

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE PRIVATE ROOM AT THE POLICE-OFFICE.

It was some short time before Rose Foster could so far recover her mental composure as to say to herself, "I must now think of what course I ought to adopt!" But when she did thus speak with the silent voice of her own soul, she threw her eyes with an instinctive shuddering upon Mrs. Brace, who was seated alone with her in the private room adjoining the public Office.

For the young orphan was suddenly reminded by all the reminiscences which swept through her brain that she was more or less indebted to the milliner for the speedy acquittal which had been brought about; and she trembled lest Mrs. Brace, forgetful of the promises made when they were previously alone together in that room, should propose to take her back again home to Pall Mall!

Mrs. Brace perceived the half-terrified, half-appealing look which the orphan had thrown upon her; and she was about to answer in words that glance which spoke so eloquently in its mute significance, when the door opened and Mr. Grumley entered the room.

"Well, ma'am," he exclaimed, in a hoarse bassoon voice, "the young lady has got off, you see. Miss Foster," he continued, "I congratulate you on the result."

"I thank you most cordially for all the sympathy you have shown and the assistance you have afforded me," said Rose in a tone of fervent gratitude. "But what has been decided in respect to Mr. Eaton?"

"Committed for trial," responded Grumley, in a laconic manner.

"And is it possible that he can be guilty?" exclaimed Rose.

"Can't say," returned the wary constable. "Don't wentur' an opinion, Miss, when things seems so wery orkard. *You're* safe out on it—and that's enough for the present."

Rose was about to make some additional remark, when a knock was heard at the door; and Mr. Grumley hastened to answered the summons.

"A gentleman wants to speak to Miss Foster," said Mobbs, who appeared in the passage outside.

"A gentleman—to speak to me!" exclaimed the

was shocked at the thought that he who had appeared as the principal witness against her could possibly be himself the perpetrator of the crime. A film came over her eyes—a dizziness passed through her brain—and a sickness seized upon her heart: for her generous nature experienced the same boundless compassion for Arthur Eaton which he himself had all along felt for her;—and moreover, her confidence in human nature was suddenly prostrated by the idea that a young man with so ingenuous a countenance, a brow whereon such noble thoughts seemed impressed, and eyes wherein all lofty emotions might be read,—her soul sank cowering down, we say, with alarm and anguish at the thought that the being created after the image of God was capable of such tremendous hypocrisy!

But this sensation of physical and mental faintness was as evanescent as it was profound: and all the young girl's ideas fell back again into their proper channels and she was recalled completely to herself, when Counsellor Sharply began to question the Hon. Arthur Eaton.

"It appeared, sir, by your statement of this morning," said the learned gentleman, "that from the court-yard of the building where the tragedy took place, four passages branch off; and you beheld *your* female figure dressed in black rush up the passage leading due north. Was it not so?"

"It was so," answered Mr. Eaton, in a tone which appeared alike gloomy and impatient.

"And you heard another witness declare it was on the southern side of the buildings that the prisoner was stopped by himself and others?" said Mr. Sharply, with an interrogative accentuation.

"I heard that point established in evidence," responded Eaton; "and I once more proclaim that I shall be delighted to see the innocence of the young lady in the dock fully established."

"Perhaps you will be gratified, sir," remarked the Counsellor, drily and laconically. "Now, sir," he continued, "will you be so kind as to state whether you were always on good terms with your valet, William Dudley——"

"If there be any harm that I might say of the dead," exclaimed Arthur Eaton indignantly, "I would sooner die myself than reveal it!"

This answer produced a breathless amazement throughout the court—astonishing even Counsellor Sharply himself, who in truth had merely put one of those hap-hazard and random questions which barristers so frequently ask, and to which they are far from anticipating any important result.

"Then there *is* harm which you know and can proclaim in reference to the deceased William Dudley?" said the learned gentleman, fixing his keen searching eyes upon the young gentleman, who was evidently much pained and agitated by the sudden turn which the proceedings were taking. "Come, sir—let us have a frank, honest, and straight-forward answer, if you please," added Mr. Sharply, who was now looking so uncommonly knowing that all the spectators really fancied he had purposely entered upon this particular line of examination, instead of having fallen into it by one of those mere hazards which so often bring the most unexpected fish to the legal net which forensic artifice throws out.

"Your worship, I appeal to you——" began Arthur Eaton, his agitation increasing every moment.

"Sir, you must answer the learned gentleman's questions," responded the magistrate, with a curtness evincing the unfavourable impression already made upon his mind in respect to Eaton.

"Then I at once and emphatically decline to explain any of the antecedents connected with the murdered Dudley," said the young gentleman, suddenly recovering a composure and a firmness which might have arisen from a consummate hardihood as well as from those generous feelings which in reality prompted his conduct: but inasmuch as the true motives which swayed him at the time were totally unknown and of course unsuspected in that court, every one present looked upon him as displaying that dogged defiance and bold-fronted obstinacy with which the perpetrators of enormous crimes so frequently endeavour to arm themselves.

"Remember, Mr. Eaton," said the magistrate, leaning over his desk and speaking in a low but earnest tone to the young gentleman,—"remember, Mr. Eaton, the equivocal position in which you stand; and take notice that the fullest and most satisfactory explanation is required at the hands of every one situated as you now are."

"Let Mr. Sharply detail the grounds of those suspicions which he has dared to allege as existing against me," exclaimed Mr. Eaton, in a loud tone and with an air of superb indignation,—"and I shall know how to answer him."

"But he has a right to question you, Mr. Eaton, on preliminary matters," observed the magistrate.

"Then, in reference to William Dudley," said the young gentleman, after a few moments' profound reflection, "I will state this much,—that some short time ago I had reason—much reason—to be dissatisfied with him: but I pardoned him—and the influence of that forgiveness on my part produced the most salutary results. In a word, William Dudley became a man whom I would have trusted with untold gold;—and the proof of my excellent opinion of him may be found in the fact that I had purposed and promised to place him at the head of the institution for which the building where he met his death is intended."

"I must now question you upon another point, Mr. Eaton," said Counsellor Sharply, who was beginning to wonder why Grumley and Mobbs did not make their appearance. "You have already admitted, in your examination of this morning, that Miss Foster was, so far as you are aware, totally unknown to William Dudley and that you cannot conceive any possible motive which she could have for the crime *at present* imputed to her? Now, will you please to inform me whether the deceased was connected, in any shape or way, with any woman who might have a motive in causing his death? Any love affair—any vengeance that might seek its bloody gratification——"

"Ah! it is possible!" murmured Arthur Eaton, a ray of light darting in unto his soul with the vividness of the electric fluid flashing through a dark chamber: and, pressing his hand to his brow, he remained standing thus for nearly a minute, absorbed in the deepest—most painful thought.

For all on a sudden had the suspicion sprung up in his mind that Fernanda—the vindictive, unsparing, merciless Fernanda—might have done the atrocious deed. Hitherto circumstantial evidence had so completely pointed towards Rose Foster, that the young gentleman was compelled, as we have already

said, to yield to his convictions, against his inclinations, and believe *her* guilty. And although the web of testimony surrounding Rose had appeared to spread out and enmesh himself,—yet, knowing himself to be innocent, he naturally concluded that the net, despite of all Counsellor Sharply's artful pullings and astute twistings, would close in again upon her whom he painfully and sorrowfully regarded as the true culprit. But now, that second random question thrown out by the barrister,—that query which suggested the possibility of *another woman* having committed the foul deed,—produced a sudden and most exciting revulsion in the ideas of the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and he was led to reflect, all in a moment, that it was indeed possible—nay, even probable that Rose was innocent and that some other female was the assassin. But that *other* female—who could she be? The answer was readily suggested by a crowd of past circumstances to the young gentleman's imagination; and he saw in a moment that if Rose were not really the murderess, *then* Fernanda must be!

Quick as a flight of birds sweeps through the ambient air, did this train of reflections traverse the mind of Arthur Eaton; and therefore was it that he pressed his hand to his throbbing brows—therefore was it that for nearly a minute he remained absorbed in profound and painful thought.

"You heard my last question, sir," observed Mr. Counsellor Sharply, who soon grew impatient: "may I request an answer to it? Or shall I repeat it for your behoof? It was whether the deceased William Dudley was known to be connected with any woman in whose breast he might have inspired feelings of a nature calculated to prompt her to the commission of this black crime?"

Eaton was about to reveal everything, when it struck him that were he to tear away the veil which covered the past he would be devoting the name of Dudley to infamy and execration, and he would likewise be denouncing Fernanda to the whole world for crimes which he had forgiven, merely because he now suspected her of a new iniquity of which she might prove to be totally guiltless. And if thus denounced, she would be arrested at once—and he must appear against her—and, condemned as a prisoner, she would inevitably perish on the scaffold. Thus even if she should be proved innocent in respect to Dudley's death, the revelation of the reasons which led him to suspect her of that crime would send her all the same to the gibbet;—and this was what Eaton would not have happen for worlds! No—because he had seduced her—he had injured her cruelly at the beginning—he had goaded her as it were to desperation;—because, also, he had pardoned her for what she had done to him, and she was now settled honourably and respectably in the world. These were the reasons wherefore he did not seek, and could never desire, to punish her for *the past;* and unless he were well assured that she was indeed guilty of a new crime, and this crime of the blackest dye, he would not take any measure that might tend to compromise her. Thus at the very instant when, in reply to Counsellor Sharply's reiterated question, he was about to reveal all those strange and terrible circumstances with which the reader is so well acquainted, a second thought sealed his lips; and he resolved to pause ere he adopted any step, which, if rashly and inconsiderately taken, might involve an unjust accusation against Fernanda for *the present*, but ruin her beyond all possibility of redemption for *the past*.

His continued silence, and the effect produced upon his countenance and manner by the conflicting feelings and bewildering thoughts which had thus swayed him from the moment when Counsellor Sharply first put the question above alluded to, all tended to prejudice him sorely in the eyes of the magistrate and strengthen the suspicions which every one present had already entertained against him.

"Well, I see that I must not hope for any satisfactory replies from this gentleman," said the barrister. "But I will yet ask him one more question," he continued, in a sinister tone: "and that is—how it was likely to happen that William Dudley was murdered *with his own knife?*"

"With his own knife!" repeated Arthur Eaton, in an amazement which was truly most unfeigned, but which was easily mistaken for the sudden excitement and alarm attendant on the discovery of an incident associated with conscious guilt.

"Yes—with his own knife!" reiterated Counsellor Sharply. "May I request your worship to produce and inspect the weapon?"

And while the magistrate was complying with this demand, a silence so breathless pervaded the court that a pin might have been heard to drop. And Rose Foster could hear the palpitations of her own heart as it beat violently and rapidly in the virgin bosom that remained upheaved and motionless with a profound suspense.

"I observe upon the handle of this knife," at length said the magistrate, "the initials *W. D.*"

A murmur of surprise mingled with the profoundest interest passed through the court; and nearly all eyes were instantaneously turned upon Rose Foster as much as to assure her that she would soon be proved innocent. Then those looks were in another moment all centred on Arthur Eaton, who was so amazed by this new incident that he felt as if he were floundering in the mazes of a troubled dream where horror, peril, and wonder were all confusedly blended.

For the inference to be deduced from the circumstance respecting the knife was too clear not to strike him as well as everybody present. It seemed to show that inasmuch as Dudley was proved by the surgeon to have been murdered and had not committed suicide, it could only have been some one closely connected with him or living in the same house who could have obtained possession of that weapon wherewith the murder was accomplished.

"Your worship will please to observe," said Mr. Counsellor Sharply, "that it was upon discovering those initials on the knife this morning that I requested the postponement of the proceedings, and that I likewise wrote upon a slip of paper the demand that Mr. Eaton should be detained until the issue of the adjourned examination. If your worship had not assented to that proposition, I should have at once applied in open court for a warrant against Mr. Eaton——"

"You dare not accuse me, sir," exclaimed Arthur, his cheeks flushing with indignation: "I am innocent——nay, I am incapable—utterly incapable of such a crime——"

"And I also am innocent!" exclaimed Rose, clasping her hands and bursting into tears—for now that she saw the turn the proceedings were so

orphan, overhearing the announcement: then, instantly reflecting that it might be Meagles, of whose treatment at the hands of the Government she was totally ignorant, she said hastily, "I will receive him here—in the presence of——"

And she stopped short as she glanced towards Mrs. Brace: for it suddenly struck her that it was in the milliner's house that Meagles had appeared to deliver her—and he would doubtless be alike astonished and indignant to observe that she was on friendly terms with the woman who had persecuted her.

But all her uneasiness on this point was dissipated in a moment: for instead of beholding Meagles enter the room as she had expected, she instantly recognised that same tall, thin, pale, but very handsome and interesting young man in whose company she had found herself for a few minutes on a certain occasion, in the waiting-room of the Earl of Desborough's mansion.

Advancing with evident timidity towards Rose, the young man took off his hat, bowed gracefully, and said, "You doubtless have forgotten me, Miss Foster—indeed, I cannot possibly suppose that you remember to have ever met me before——"

And he stopped short, for he perceived the looks of Mrs. Brace fixed angrily and suspiciously upon him. Indeed, this lady recollected perfectly well having seen him before: but where or under what circumstances she could not, for the life of her, call to mind.

As for Mr. Grumley—not being interested in the present scene, he walked to the window whistling one of the tunes to which he had sung a bacchanalian song at the free-and-easy where he had passed the greater portion of the previous night.

"It would be a ridiculous affectation on my part, sir," observed Rose, in reply to the young gentleman's remarks,—"were I to declare that I do not remember you."

"Then you recollect that we have met before?" exclaimed the stranger, a perceptible gleam of satisfaction lighting up his pale countenance.

"Yes—for a few minutes—at the Earl of Desborough's," responded Rose;—and Mrs. Brace, overhearing what was said, instantly called to mind the fact that it was so.

"Curiosity led me into the Court a few minutes ago," continued the young man: "for as I was passing through the street I heard the observations which certain loungers at the door were making upon the proceedings within. I accordingly entered, little suspecting that the young lady of whom the people outside were talking was known even by sight to me. With difficulty I forced my way through the crowd; and at the same moment that I succeeded in obtaining admission to the Court, you were leaving it in company with that lady;"—and the stranger glanced towards Mrs. Brace. "I recognised you instantaneously," he continued, fixing his eyes upon Rose with an expression of tender interest and respectful admiration: "Oh! yes—I knew you again immediately—for since I saw you that day at the Earl of Desborough's, I have thought of you often—very often!"

The countenance of the young maiden became suddenly suffused with a deep blush as these words fell upon her ear;—and she glanced timidly towards Mrs. Brace to ascertain whether she had overheard that delicate compliment—for such indeed it was, and uttered too in a tone so fervid and sincere, but accompanied with a manner so profoundly respectful and timidly deprecating, that even the pure-minded, innocent, and artless Rose Foster could not possibly take offence.

But at the very moment when the maiden thus threw her rapid glance towards Mrs. Brace, Mr. Grumley, turning away from the window, accosted that lady, saying, "P'raps it would be as well, ma'am, if you and me was to have a few minutes' talk together; seeing as how that I must be off almost directly."

Mrs. Brace accordingly rose from the seat which she had occupied near the fire, and hastened to converse apart with Mr. Grumley in the window-recess.

"You may conceive, Miss Foster," now resumed the stranger, drawing nearer to her and speaking in a lower tone than at first, "how surprised — how shocked—how pained I was to behold in you the heroine of this day's sad proceedings. But, no—you cannot conceive what my feelings were, because you are ignorant how deep was the impression you made upon me during the few minutes that we conversed together at Desborough House."

Rose started—surveyed the young man with astonishment for a few moments—and then, casting down her eyes, blushed deeply.

"Oh! do not be offended with me," he said, in so earnest, sincere, and appealing a tone that no measure of resentment could have withstood it; "I would sooner die than cause you pain—for God knows you have this day endured enough! But I was telling you how shocked I was ere now to recognise in the accused Rose Foster that same young lady whose image has ever been present in my memory since first we met at the Earl's mansion in Berkeley Square: but that first feeling of anguish on your account was almost instantaneously relieved by the intelligence that you were discharged—and then a burning joy filled my soul when I heard that your innocence had been made manifest beyond all possibility of doubt. Yes—Oh! yes—I wept tears of ecstacy and bliss at the issue of that painful ordeal through which you have passed;—and I overheard persons near me saying, '*He is perhaps the young lady's brother?*'—'*No,*' replied some one better informed than they: '*Miss Foster is not only an orphan, but has neither brother nor sister, nor any near relation.*'—Then I thought how happy I should be if I were your brother: for I also am an orphan, and without a single relative in the whole wide world," added the young man mournfully.

There was something in this announcement which touched the tenderest chord in the heart of Rose Foster; and, raising her eyes, she surveyed the stranger with a look of benevolent feeling and compassionate interest. That avowal which he had just made, seemed to establish as it were a secret affinity between them: the identity of their orphan positions in the world appeared to place them all in a moment on a footing of friendliness. The barrier of cold reserve was suddenly removed: the diffidence of strangers was annihilated. Those words—"*For I also am an orphan!*" were a better—Oh! far better introduction on the part of that pale but handsome young man to the poor but lovely maiden, than if a Duke or a Duchess had presented him to her with all the usual forms and ceremonies—hollow words and meaningless obeisances!

"Yes—I thought how happy I should be, were I

really able to step forward and claim you as a sister," continued the young man, encouraged by the look of tender interest which Rose had cast upon him: "and while this idea was yet oscillating in my mind, I overheard the same person who had last spoken say, '*Yes, poor girl! she lost her parents under the cruellest circumstances: for I was living next door to them at the time.*'—Then this individual began to narrate some distressing tale to those near him; while I, unable to restrain my feelings any longer, determined to present myself to you—offer you my congratulations on the triumphant issue of this day's proceedings—and beseech you, Miss Foster, to regard me henceforth as a friend."

These last words were uttered in a low tremulous tone, and with a certain hesitation of manner: for the stranger was evidently fearful of giving offence to that maiden whose mind he felt convinced was as pure as her person was beautiful.

"I am deeply—deeply grateful to you for the kind interest which you have shown in my behalf," said Miss Foster, her own voice trembling with emotions profoundly stirred. "But since you are acquainted with my name, permit me to inquire that of one whose friendly conduct of this evening will never be effaced from my memory."

"My name is George Woodfall," was the response; "and I am by profession an artist. But let us now speak of yourself, Miss Foster—for I am determined to act as your friend; and if the identity of orphanage do not give me this right and even impose this duty, then human nature has no ties and society no sympathies beyond mere conventionalities and empty, hollow flatteries. Tell me, then, Miss Foster, tell me whether you have kind friends to take care of you—a happy home to receive you——"

"Home!—the orphan's home!" murmured the young maiden, her bosom heaving with a profound sigh, approaching almost to a subdued sob, at the same time.

"Oh! then I may yet be enabled to serve you, Miss Foster!" exclaimed George Woodfall, with impassioned ardour alike in his tone and manner; "and I beseech—I implore—I entreat you to look upon me as a friend who would lay down his life to save you a single pang."

"Mr. Woodfall," said Rose, wiping away the tears which had started forth upon her long lashes at the mention of the word "*home*,"—and now as she fixed her sweet blue eyes upon the young artist's countenance, there was something so melting in their expression and so softly touching in her whole aspect, that he felt as if he had known and loved her from their very infancy;—"Mr. Woodfall," she said, "I am totally unable to find words to convey an idea of all the gratitude I feel for this most generous, unexpected, and disinterested behaviour on your part. As candidly as you have spoken to me, so frankly will I answer you;—and my answer is," she added, her voice sinking to a low and tremulous whisper, "that I have no friends to take care of me—no home to receive me!"

"But that lady?" said Woodfall, casting his eyes towards Mrs. Brace, who was in deep conference with Grumley in the window-recess.

"That is Mrs. Brace, the milliner," responded the orphan, again wiping away the tears from her eyes. "I was in her service—but certain circumstances—which I cannot now mention——in fine, I will not return to her establishment——"

And she looked shudderingly towards the milliner: for although she had forgiven that woman—although she believed her to be penitent for the past—and although she felt grateful to her for the manner in which she had behaved relative to the proceedings which had just terminated,—the young girl nevertheless recoiled from the idea of venturing back again into a house where she had already endured so much, and where she would again be exposed to the persecutions of the Prince of Wales.

"Miss Foster," said George Woodfall, suddenly breaking a silence which had lasted for upwards of a minute—and he looked the maiden full in the face as he spoke;—"Miss Foster, can you—will you—dare you trust me? Or is your experience of the world of too bitter a nature to permit you to put any confidence in a stranger?"

"Mr. Woodfall," replied the young girl, firmly, "not for an instant will I return your generosity by the ingratitude of even leaving you in a state of uncertainty respecting the sentiments with which you have inspired me. Those sentiments are the most implicit confidence in the nobility of your character and the fullest reliance upon your honour. For are we not both orphans?" she demanded, in a tone of the most touching pathos: "and do we not know too well how sorrowful is the lot of orphanage to have the heart to aggravate that woe or enhance that affliction?"

"God forbid that *I* should be capable of such iniquity!" exclaimed Woodfall, fervently. "You have declared that you can place confidence in me—and I thank you: you have said that you will put reliance upon me—and you shall receive at my hands the respect, the attention, and the protection with which a brother would surround a well-beloved and cherished sister. Know, then, my dear Miss Foster," he continued, "that though a humble artist, I have recently made several friends in the sphere of aristocracy and fashion. Thanks to the patronage of the Earl of Desborough and his amiable Countess the introductions I have received to some noble families open to me the most brilliant prospects;'—and as Woodfall thus spoke, the warm glow of high aspirations appeared upon his cheeks and poured a flood of light into his intelligent eyes. "But amongst the introductions which I have obtained through the interest of Lord and Lady Desborough," he proceeded after a few moments' pause, "none has given me greater pleasure than that which has rendered me acquainted with the Marchioness of Bellenden. Have you ever heard of that excellent, generous-hearted, and amiable lady?"

"Yes," replied Rose Foster: "her mansion, which is called the Priory, is in the Edgeware Road, at no great distance from the house which I was once enabled to call my home."

"You have heard, then, of the Marchioness of Bellenden," said Woodfall; "and you are therefore well acquainted with the admirable reputation which she bears?"

"My father and mother were wont to speak of her as a lady who did honour to that aristocratic sphere to which she belonged," said Rose,—"instead of deriving any honour therefrom."

"And your parents rightly estimated her character," exclaimed Woodfall. "Would you, then, accept a home at Bellenden Priory?"

The maiden gave no immediate answer: but she fixed her eyes upon the artist with a mingled expression of reproach and doubt—as if to intimate that it would be cruel of him to trifle with her feelings, and yet that she could scarcely believe him to be capable of such ungenerous conduct.

"Miss Foster, I am serious," he hastened to observe. "Do not wrong me by a suspicion——"

"Oh! pardon me, Mr. Woodfall," she exclaimed: "but I feared lest in your anxiety to serve me, you might be over-rating your ability—or at least that you fancied others to possess hearts as good and generous as your own, and as willing to afford the friendless orphan a home——"

"The Marchioness of Bellenden will receive you with open arms," interrupted Woodfall, with the solemn seriousness of one who was confident in the assertion he was making. "Your misfortunes will endear you to her: and moreover, even before I knew your name—which I only learnt ere now—I have spoken of you to her ladyship——"

"Spoken of me!" exclaimed the orphan, once more throwing upon the artist a look which if not actually laden with suspicion, was at least mistrustful enough to give him pain.

"Oh! now you doubt me again!" he murmured, in a tone of mingled reproach and vexation. "But it is natural—I am a stranger——"

"Once more I beseech you to pardon me," said Rose: and, yielding to the impulse of that ingenuous fervour which made her feel that she was but ill-requiting the young man for all his kindness and disinterested attention towards her, she extended her hand, observing, "I was wrong to doubt you even for a moment: and indeed it was not doubt—but rather amazement and wonder——"

"That I should have ever mentioned you to the Marchioness?" exclaimed Woodfall, taking the fair hand of the orphan and pressing it gently in

his own. "But have I not already told you that your image has dwelt in my memory since the moment when we first met at the house of Lord Desborough in Berkeley Square? Is it surprising, then, that I should have spoken of you as the *fair unknown* to a lady who condescends to express an interest in my welfare?"

"Mr. Woodfall," said Rose, casting down her eyes and withdrawing the hand which she had abstractedly suffered to linger in his own for a few moments,—"I know not how I could have merited the good opinion which you so generously formed of me——"

"We will not talk upon that subject for the present," interrupted the artist, in a gentle tone. "Time is wearing on—it is already six o'clock," he added, consulting his watch, which was a gift from Lord Desborough; "and you must be anxious to depart from a place which is not calculated to excite the most pleasurable reminiscences."

Rose Foster gave not an immediate reply: but pressing her hand to her brow, she mentally took a rapid survey of her position. To return to Mrs. Brace's establishment was not to be thought of: to receive money from her was to accept a boon which would give that woman a species of right to visit her at any lodging where she might settle herself. Such a proceeding suited not the views of the orphan who was anxious to withdraw herself entirely from that channel of existence into which she had blindly and unadvisedly launched herself in the first instance, and which had so nearly hurried her on to destruction. But Meagles and Melmoth—what of them?—were they forgotten by the young girl! No—oh! no: but the former was an unmarried man at whose hands she could not directly seek protection; and not for a minute would she think of again becoming a burthen to the latter. For be it remembered that she was totally unaware of all that had happened to both of them.

What, then, did the orphan decide upon? Not to return to Mrs. Brace's establishment: nor to receive any succour, pecuniary, or otherwise, at her hands. No—nor yet to appeal to Meagles, nor fly for refuge to the poor working man. But she resolved upon trusting to George Woodfall—this new friend whom Providence appeared to have sent her at the moment of a cruelly embarrassing extremity. For the alternative with the poor maiden was to procure a home,—an asylum where she would enjoy personal security and mental peace. And this home—was it not now offered to her?

"Miss Foster, you appear to hesitate—you are undecided?" said the artist. "My God! do you still doubt me? Oh! if I did not entertain a true, sincere, and holy interest in your welfare, this utter want of confidence on your part would prompt me to bid you a sorrowful farewell and retire."

"How often am I destined thus to wound your generous feelings by that semblance of suspicion which my manner so unfortunately assumes?" exclaimed Rose, once more proffering her hand which the artist took with a joy that he could not conceal: but this joy was mingled with so profound a respect that so far from shocking even the most delicate sensibility, it could only serve as a proof of his honest sincerity.

"Then you accept the proposal which I have made you, Miss Foster?" he said.

"Alas! I have no alternative—poor orphan that I am!" she murmuringly answered, her eyes filling with tears.

"The Marchioness of Bellenden will welcome you as cordially and as warmly as if you were a sister or a daughter," rejoined Woodfall. "And now—if you will say farewell to Mrs. Brace——"

"One word," ejaculated Rose Foster, in a low but hurried whisper, as she glanced almost in affright towards the milliner, who was still conversing with Grumley in the window-recess: "I do not wish Mrs. Brace to know whither I am going. This may appear singular to you;—but on a future occasion—when we are better acquainted—I will explain my reasons——"

"Never shall I seek to penetrate farther into your confidence than you may be willing to admit me," interrupted George Woodfall. "The friendship which I proffer you claims no rights—asserts no privileges — imposes no conditions: it is the friendship—the love—the affection which a brother may offer to a sister!"

"And as such do I accept and reciprocate it," answered Rose, profoundly touched by the sense of all that was noble, generous, delicate, and considerate in the language, manner, and conduct of the young artist.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

MRS. BRACE AND MR. PETER GRUMLEY.

THE room in which the preceding dialogue had taken place, was large though not lofty: and thus, while Rose Foster and George Woodfall were discoursing near the fire-place, nothing that passed between them was overheard by the milliner and the head constable who were holding their conference in the window-recess.

And now let us see what were the topics of conversation with this latter couple.

"Well, ma'am," observed Mr. Grumley, in a low and confidential tone, as Mrs. Brace accompanied him apart into the window-recess, "I suppose you ain't wery sorry that the present business has come off so well."

"On the contrary," returned the milliner, "I can scarcely restrain my joy. You certainly managed the affair excellently——"

"Indeed, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Peter Grumley, "there was no management in the matter at all. The thing took its regular course—and there was no necessity for me to make use of any artifice or stratagem whatsomever."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, surveying the head-constable with the most unaffected astonishment. "The inculpation of Arthur Eaton——"

"Was brought about by the natural course of events, ma'am," rejoined the officer. "Everything went on as smooth as possible; and justice received nothing more than the ordinary amount of help, and certainly not the slightest shadow of hindrance."

"I am totally at a loss what to think or how to understand you, Mr. Grumley," said the milliner. "In the first place, did you not contrive the little incident of the discovery of the blade of the knife in Mr. Eaton's own apartment at his father's

mansion?—did you not contrive this incident, I ask, for the purpose of procuring Miss Foster's immediate acquittal?"

"No such a thing, ma'am!" exclaimed Grumley, with almost an expression of indignation upon his countenance. "I don't do business in that fashion, I can assure you. Besides, how do you suppose that I could procure a broken blade to fit so exactly as the one did that was produced in court just now?"

"Well, well—I perceive that you do not choose to be too communicative, Mr. Grumley," said Mrs. Brace, her arch smile displaying the fine teeth which shone like ivory betwixt the moist coral of her luscious lips. "Keep your own counsel—I shall not attempt to pry into your secrets. All that you undertake you evidently manage so well that those who employ you ought to be satisfied with the results and not seek to ascertain how those consequences have been brought about. I have not forgotten your remark that when the means do not present themselves of their own accord you invent or devise them."

"Yes, ma'am—and so does every long-headed person in this world to a certain extent," observed Grumley, softening in his manner as his libidinous eyes feasted themselves upon the milliner's full bosom, which was much exposed in consequence of the rich scarf being thrown back on account of the heat of the room. "But I see that you don't precisely understand the events of this afternoon," continued Grumley, edging closer towards Mrs. Brace and bending his tall form somewhat so as to be enabled to maintain a confidential kind of whispering in her ear. "The fact is that I was quite sure all along of Miss Foster's innocence; and I knowed that if any one could make it appear, Counsellor Sharply was the man. But I must candidly confess that at fust things seemed to go bad enough against the young lass, till a slight turn took place when it was proved that she was running off in one direction while the lady in black which Mr. Eaton saw had fled in another. Then, you see, the suspicion instantly arose that Mr. Eaton might have invented *his* lady in black;—and immediately afterwards comes the extraordinary affair of the knife with the initials upon it. As a matter of course, Counsellor Sharply seized on them two pints; and he asked for a remand to enable me and Mobbs to go and make a search at Lord Marchmont's house in Hanover Square. Well, I can't say that I expected to find anything important there, although such-like investigations have at times led to the most extraordinary discoveries. And such did it prove to be in this instance: for, lo and behold! in one of Mr. Eaton's drawers, just underneath his clean shirts, we found that wery blade which we produced in Court."

"And do you really believe Mr. Eaton to be the murderer?" demanded Mrs. Brace, fixing her eyes keenly upon the constable's countenance.

"Well—I'm not in the habit of giving a hasty or rash opinion," said the officer, in a musing tone: "for don't you see, ma'am, it's a sort of pint of honour with us never to be mistaken in any way or out in our reckoning. If we didn't preserve the character of *infallibility*—that's the word, ma'am—we should lose all the confidence that's placed in us. So, you perceive, it don't suit us to wentur' an opinion *until* we're sure that it's the right one. At the same time, I don't mind whispering to you, ma'am—for you're such a wery nice lady, that you could wheedle me out of anything——"

"I am really gratified by the compliment, Mr. Grumley," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, laughing. "But you were about to give me your opinion in a confidential manner?" she added, interrogatively.

"And my opinion is, ma'am," rejoined the officer, "that Mr. Eaton will find it precious difficult to convince a jury that he is innocent. But he won't be hung, ma'am—he won't be hung," added Grumley, looking as solemnly mysterious as a drunken parson trying to seem sober while preaching his sermon: "for this is what will get him off, ma'am—this is what will get him off:" and the constable tapped his forehead significantly.

"Ah! I understand you," said Mrs. Brace, really experiencing some degree of interest in this portion of the conversation: for she had not failed to observe, while in court, that Mr. Eaton was a very handsome and prepossessing young man. "He is not to be held accountable for his actions?" she added, inquiringly.

"Just so," responded Grumley.

"And therefore," continued Mrs. Brace, "your opinion is that he committed the murder in a fit of monomania—or, at all events, while labouring under some aberration of the intellect——"

"Well, I suppose that's about the long and short of the matter," said the constable. "You now understand, ma'am, at all events, that the discovery of the blade of the knife was as regular and straightfor'ard a transaction on the part of me and Mobbs as such a thing could possibly be. The truth is that although I'd go a great way to get a person off, no matter whether innocent or guilty — yet I wouldn't for the world play any tricks to shove the load of guilty on to the shoulders that ought not to bear it. In Miss Foster's case, I let things take their natural course, so that I might see what would turn up; and if circumstantial evidence had borne her down altogether, *then* I should have began to consider how I was to save her. But as her innocence transpired in the regular way, I was not called upon to step out of the usual path. So much for that case: but with respect to t'other——"

"Caroline Walters, you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace: then, as a sudden gloom spread over her countenance, she observed, "I cannot, for the life of me, comprehend how you hope to save that unfortunate girl."

"Haven't I promised that she should be saved?" demanded Grumley, in that tone of dogged confidence which men of his class and stamp are so apt to assume when they are impressed with the conviction of their ability to achieve a particular end.

"You have promised, certainly," returned Mrs. Brace: "but——"

"And isn't there another five hundred guineas to be paid over to me, if I succeed?" exclaimed the constable.

"Yes—and the sum shall be forthcoming with as much pleasure as promptitude on my part," rejoined the milliner.

"Then don't be under any apprehension, ma'am," said Grumley. "What I have undertaken to do, I shall perform; and you'll have to pay me over the five hundred yaller boys to-morrow night. But I give you due warning that the evidence is so strong against Caroline Walters, it will be impossible to get her off by fair means."

"I care not how the affair is managed, so that she be rescued from the grasp of justice," exclaimed the milliner. "But why did not her case come on to-day before the Lambeth justices of peace?"

"Because I had the investigation of the affair put into my hands," answered Grumley; "and in consequence of the understanding which was come to with me at Carlton House this morning, I immediately sent one of my underlings over to the Lambeth authorities to let 'em know that Caroline Walters musn't be brought up till to-morrow, as I expected to have the case completely made out against her by that time."

"Then you have taken an ostensibly hostile attitude towards her?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"How the devil could I do otherwise?" demanded Mr. Grumley. "Aint I the head officer of Bow Street?—and must not people in authority maintain at least a show of consistency and propriety? But don't be alarmed—everything will go on as it ought to do—and the lass shall escape to-morrow evening as sure as I'm standing here."

"And you will give her fifty guineas and tell her to get out of the country as soon as possible," said Mrs. Brace.

"I'll not only give her the money, but also a safe disguise into the bargain," returned the constable. "Lord bless ye, ma'am—I never do things by halves! But what are you going to do with that sweet young gal there?" inquired Mr. Grumley, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of Rose Foster, who was in earnest and whispering discourse with George Woodfall.

"I shall keep my promise and let her go whithersover she chooses," responded the milliner, who was by no means inclined to run any more risks of exposure and ruin by assisting the designs of the Prince of Wales in respect to the lovely orphan.

"That young chap seems to be getting precious tender towards her," whispered Grumley, again glancing over his shoulder and observing the respectful admiration and soft solicitude with which George Woodfall was contemplating Rose Foster. "P'raps he's making her a hoffer of marriage."

"I wish to heaven he was," rejoined Mrs. Brace. "He would then take her so completely off my hands that I should not be compelled to furnish her with any of my own hard-earned gold to set her afloat in the world."

"Well, ma'am, I shall say good bye to you now," observed Mr. Peter Grumley: "and if you'll be at home—and alone—to-morrow night between ten and eleven o'clock, I shall take the liberty of dropping in to bring you the news about Miss Caroline Walters——"

"And receive your remaining five hundred guineas," added Mrs. Brace, with a smile. "You will be welcome, I can assure you."

Mr. Grumley threw upon the milliner a look which seemed to say that she was a very desirable person and had considerably inflamed his passions during the quarter of an hour's chat in the window-recess: and Mrs. Brace, penetrating what was passing in his mind, laughed in a low but merry manner at the idea of having captivated the huge, ugly, revolting, shabby-looking fellow who thus dared to regard her with such a libidinous rossness.

Had he been a handsome, dashing young nobleman, with yellow kid gloves and a scented cambric handkerchief, Mrs. Brace would have responded to his lustful glances with looks of piquant archness and voluptuous encouragement: but the sensitiveness of the fashionable milliner could only treat with a good-humoured ridicule the amorous pretensions of one whom she dared not offend by showing herself outraged and shocked at his conduct.

Heaving a profound sigh, Mr. Peter Grumley made a low bow to Mrs. Brace, and stalked out of the room;—and the noise of the door closing behind him, aroused George Woodfall and Rose Foster from the deep interest of the *tête-à-tête* which had at this moment reached the point specified at the close of the preceding chapter.

"Well, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace, accosting the young orphan with an appearance of so much maternal affability and kindness that George Woodfall could not help wondering at the extreme repugnance which Rose had demonstrated at the idea of returning into the milliner's establishment, —"what course have you determined to adopt?—and in what manner can I be serviceable to you?"

"This gentleman," said Rose, indicating the artist with a glance, and speaking in a tone of modest decision and maidenly firmness which at once convinced the milliner that some definite plan had been already resolved upon by the orphan girl, even if it were not actually arranged in concert with the young man who stood beside her,—"this gentleman," she said, "is Mr. Woodfall—and through his kind, benevolent, and compassionate aid, I expect to find a home at the abode of a lady with whom he is acquainted."

"I am perfectly aware that I have not the least right to demand of you an account of your conduct," said Mrs. Brace, now feeling herself piqued inasmuch as she saw that the orphan had purposely avoided naming the lady and mentioning the address whereunto she had alluded. "But at the same time," continued the milliner, almost immediately recovering her good humour, "I am overjoyed to hear that your prospects are so agreeable—and I wish you all possible happiness to compensate for the misery you have endured this day."

"Farewell, Mrs. Brace," said Rose, tendering her hand to the milliner. "Once more do I thank you for your kindness in this affair."

"And you will forget the past, dear Rose?" whispered Mrs. Brace, as she stooped forward and kissed her upon the cheek.

"Yes—I have promised to do so, and I will keep my word," responded the orphan.

The milliner then took her departure; and a few minutes afterwards George Woodfall and Rose Foster entered a hackney-coach which had been sent for at their request.

A considerable crowd was gathered in the street to catch a glimpse of the charming girl as she came forth from the Office; and loud cheers welcomed her as the artist handed her into the vehicle.

The coach drove rapidly away: the multitude dispersed—and while Rose Foster was being conducted to the mansion of the Marchioness of Bellenden, the Hon. Arthur Eaton was entering a solitary cell within the sinister-looking walls of Newgate.

CHAPTER CXXIX.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

It was about twenty minutes to one o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, that a hackney-coach stopped at the gate of Horsemonger Lane Gaol; and two men leapt forth.

These were Mr. Peter Grumley and his factotum Mobbs; and on entering the lobby, they were instantaneously saluted in familiar terms by the turnkey on duty.

"Come for the young 'ooman, eh?" said this functionary, when the usual compliments accompanied by a little chaffing had been exchanged.

"Yes," responded Grumley. "How has she behaved herself, old feller?"

"Silent, reserved, and obstinate," was the answer. "She's a pretty gal—a deuced pretty gal: but there's moments when the devil looks out of her eyes. I couldn't help surweying her with attention when I went round last night to lock up; and I thought to myself, thinks I, '*Well, I'm blowed if you ain't capable of murdering anybody that stands in your path.*'"

"And so she hasn't talked at all—eh?" observed Grumley, interrogatively.

"She hasn't said nothing either bad, good, or indifferent," answered the turnkey. "The matron tried to draw her out yesterday—but it was no go, I understand; and so I suppose she means to see what turn matters may take, before she opens her lips on the subject."

"Well, then, she'll soon have an opportunity of satisfying her curiosity," observed Grumley: "for she'll be committed to-day to a certainty. I've got a precious strong case against her, I can tell you."

"Oh! I s'pose there's no doubt about it," remarked the turnkey, as he opened the inner door of the lobby and ordered some underling to fetch Caroline Walters from her cell.

In a few minutes the young girl made her appearance, in the custody of the underling just alluded to; and, being transferred to the charge of Grumley and Mobbs, she accompanied the officials into the hackney-coach which immediately drove away.

Caroline Walters was deadly pale—and, as this pallor showed through the brunette hue of her complexion, it gave a ghastly aspect to her countenance. Her fine dark eyes shone with a restless and sinister light which vibrated as a star: and her pearly teeth were clenched behind the closely compressed lips. There was an awful composure in her manner which, when considered in respect to her looks, seemed compounded of dark menace against some one and of a fixed and desperate resolution with reference to herself.

The moment the vehicle rolled away from the gate of Horsemonger Lane Prison, Mr. Grumley drew up the window on his side, while Mobbs did the same on the other; and then the head constable addressed himself in a hasty and laconic manner to Caroline.

"Miss Walters," he said, "we have not many minutes to converse together—and we must make the most of so short a time."

"What can *you* have to say to me?" she demanded, raising her eyes and glancing suspiciously from the ill-looking countenance of Grumley to the repulsive features of Mobbs—for the two constables were seated opposite to her in the vehicle.

"Listen—and don't interrupt me more than you can help, Miss," resumed the head officer. "Your case is a very bad one—and you're sure to be committed for trial. If committed for trial, you're sure to be found guilty and hung."

"I already perceive the weight of that circumstantial evidence which will be arrayed against me," answered Caroline, in a low and somewhat thick tone; "and I am prepared for the worst. But I shall at least have the satisfaction of giving a full and complete exposure of the iniquities of the immense brothel over which the arch-procuress Mrs. Brace presides, and which has for so many years helped to sustain the midwifery establishment in Fore Street."

These words were pronounced with a concentrated bitterness of feeling denoting the stern resolution which the young girl had adopted not to die unavenged.

"And moreover," she added, after a brief pause, "I will proclaim in the presence of the magistrate and the whole court the name of *him* who seduced me so vilely and abandoned me so cruelly. Oh! I will not pass through the disgrace of the Old Bailey and the hangman, without dragging others through the mire and the filth of public exposure, infamy, and shame."

And now the sinister light which burnt in her eyes flashed forth in those rays which carry a shudder with them through the entire frame that they appear to penetrate and into the depths of the soul to which they seem to pierce.

"Miss Walters," Grumley hastened to observe, "you must renounce your present plans and alter your policy altogether."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the young girl, now surveying the constable with ineffable amazement.

"I mean, Miss Walters, that I am your friend—and that I will save you, if you will permit me to do it," responded Grumley, in a rapid tone.

"Save me!" repeated Caroline, clutching with a hysterical joy at the hope which fell thus suddenly upon her soul.

"Yes—save you from the scaffold, Miss," answered Grumley. "Now listen one moment. Whether innocent or guilty, you'll find that the evidence will be overwhelming against you—and you will likewise find that it's my own self as will have got up the case so strong against you."

"Then how can you proclaim yourself my friend?" asked Caroline, bitterly.

"Because I am compelled to do my dooty as a officer in the eyes of the *public*," replied Grumley, meeting unflinchingly the searching look which the girl threw upon him: "whereas *in private*," he added, "I may befriend and serve whomsoever I choose."

"I understand you," said Caroline, her confidence returning. "But wherefore should you feel any interest in me? I am an utter stranger to you——"

"True: but Mrs. Brace has enjoined me to do all I can for you——"

"Mrs. Brace!" repeated Caroline, in a tone of indescribable disgust. "Ah! yes—I understand—she fears exposure, and she would conciliate me! Is it not so?"

"Never mind the reasons that she may have,

Miss," exclaimed Grumley. "It is enow for you to know that she has took up your case wery kind indeed—and Counsellor Sharply is engaged to make a fight for you—and I'm resolved to save you, happen what will. But in order that our endeavours may be crowned with success, you must promise to do exactly what I tell you and act precisely as I shall point out."

"And will you guarantee my safety on those conditions?" demanded Caroline eagerly—for now that a hope was once more excited on her soul, she longed—oh! how eagerly she longed to live not only for the sake of life itself, but also for the purposes of her darkly-cherished vengeance!

"Miss Walters," said Grumley, in a firm, decisive, and almost arbitrary tone,—"you must stick to the path that I am about to chalk out for you, and then I'll guarantee your safety—but not unless."

"Tell me all that I am to do," observed the young girl, "and you shall find me obedient and docile."

"In the first place," resumed Grumley, "you must not be surprised if you see my man Mobbs here get up into the witness-box and say all he possibly can against you—because that's our wocation. Besides, it's necessary that we should appear rayther bitter against you than too kind, or else we should be suspected of *doing on purpose* the thing that's to happen arterwards, and which musn't seem to be through any fault of our'n."

"I do not understand you, sir," said Caroline.

"But you will before the day's over, my dear," returned Grumley; "and you will bless your stars that you ever fell in with such a good-hearted creetur' as I am. For I tell you that by nine o'clock this evening you shall be free—at large—in safety—although things will go precious queer against you presently. But this is what you must do:—When all the evidence on the side of the prosecution has been disposed of, and the magistrate asks you what you have to say why you shouldn't be committed for trial, you must at once and emphatically declare your innocence."

"And I *am* innocent!" exclaimed Caroline, with a strange commingling of hauteur and indignation in her tone and manner.

"That's just the way to say it before the magistrate, Miss," observed Grumley, with as much coolness as if it were a mere stage-rehearsal. "His worship will then ask you what proof you have to advance—and Counsellor Sharply will probably recommend you to reserve your defence—because the Counsellor won't know what *my* after-plans are. But you must speak out boldly and say that if the magistrate will allow you to visit the house in Fore Street where the murder was committed, you will there show the constable who shall accompany you, the most striking and startling proofs of your innocence. Now, can you manage to say all this with a firm and resolute air—an air that looks like innocence, you know?"

"Assuredly I can," answered Caroline: "and the more so, inasmuch as I am innocent——Oh! my God—I am really and truly innocent—or may I perish this very moment! But proceed: what next am I to do?"

"Leave the rest to me," answered Grumley. "Only do what I have told you—and do it well—and I'll guarantee that you shan't sleep in a prison to-night. And what's more," added the head constable, "I am to give you fifty guineas for Mrs. Brace, which amiable lady has took a wery lively interest in your welfare. But mind—not a word about vengeance against the late Mrs. Lindley—nor Mrs. Brace—nor against your seducer: all that kind of palaver will do the cause no good—and may prevent the magistrate from granting the request which you are to make. But here we are at his worship's house."

And as Mr. Peter Grumley uttered these last words, the hackney-coach stopped.

In the times of which we are writing there was no regularly established police-court on the Surrey side of the metropolis, and prisoners were accordingly taken to the dwellings of the justices of the peace residing in that district. It was therefore at the private residence of a local magistrate that the present case was to be investigated: but his worship had a large room fitted up with all the miniature conveniences similar to those which on a larger scale characterised the police-office in Bow Street. And this room was crowded to excess when Caroline Walters was introduced precisely as the clock struck one—the hour which his worship had appointed to take the case, when all the night-charges were disposed of.

Counsellor Sharply was seated in the little pew provided for the accommodation of counsel; and he bestowed a nod of recognition upon Mr. Peter Grumley as this official escorted Caroline Walters to the dock, the steps of which she mounted with a firmness of tread and of demeanour which produced different impressions on those present. For whereas in every assembly there is a majority of persons who are always inclined to look upon the dark and the evil side of human nature in preference to the bright and the good,—so on this occasion did the larger portion of the audience immediately attribute Caroline's manner to the hardihood of a guilt which strove to assume the brazen front of innocence,—while the minority of the spectators, who after all were the more humane as well as the better experienced, shook their heads mysteriously and said to themselves, "That young creature is a victim, and not a criminal!"

Rapid but searching was the glance which the prisoner threw around the Court to ascertain if there were any familiar faces there: and her looks settled upon the late Mrs. Lindley's two servants, who were seated on a bench together with one of the constables that had taken Caroline into custody on the night of the murder.

And now the examination commenced by the magistrate's clerk inquiring the prisoner's name, age, and profession. To these questions she responded in a firm but respectful tone; and Counsellor Sharply then intimated that he appeared on her behalf.

Mr. Peter Grumley, who had the management of the case, now made a sign for one of the deceased midwife's servants to enter the witness-box; and this female, having been sworn, deposed as follows:—

"I have been for twelve years in the service of the late Mrs. Lindley. She was a midwife, and received young ladies who wished to retire into seclusion during the period of their confinement. Miss Walters, the prisoner, became an inmate of the establishment in that manner, a few weeks ago. She was considered a young lady of very extraordinary disposition; and when she was confined, she manifested a great malignity of feeling towards Mrs. Lindley. The surgeon

who was called in to attend upon her, remonstrated with her upon the irritability which she showed towards Mrs. Lindley."

Here Caroline, who had kept her eyes fixed upon the floor from the first moment that the witness began speaking, looked suddenly up and exclaimed, "Oh! if I might explain to your worship the reasons which made me hate and abhor that Mrs. Lindley——"

"You shall speak presently," interrupted the magistrate.

Caroline stopped short—and as she glanced her eyes rapidly round, ere she bent them down again, she caught the reproving look which Counsellor Sharply threw upon her—for the learned gentleman was naturally horrified at the immense damage which the prisoner had just inflicted upon her own case by the admission which she had made relative to feelings of hatred and abhorrence in respect to the deceased.

The female servant continued her deposition:—

"I believe there was some quarrel or dispute between the deceased and Miss Walters the evening before the one on which the murder took place. For on that evening Mrs. Lindley locked Miss Walters up in her bed-chamber; and all next day she was kept a prisoner in her room. I took up her meals—and each time when I went into the chamber, I found Miss Walters very much excited—dashing her hand violently against her forehead, and muttering dark threats against Mrs. Lindley and her seducer. But she did not say who her seducer was: neither have I ever heard. It was about nine o'clock in the evening of the murder—that is to say, the evening before last—when I took up Miss Walters' supper to her chamber. I placed the tray upon the table—wished her good-night—and quitted the room. I locked the door outside, in obedience to strict orders which I had received from Mrs. Lindley. At a quarter to eleven Mrs. Lindley told me and my fellow-servant that we might go up to-bed, but that she intended to sit up a little longer. We bade her good night and left her in the parlour. That was the last time I saw her alive. It was about twenty minutes past eleven, when I and my fellow-servant, who slept in the same room together, were alarmed by a sudden noise as if something was rushing wildly up the stairs from the bottom of the house to the top. We opened the door and heard the cat mewing and crying in a fearful manner: and an idea struck us that something was wrong. So we descended the stairs together—and as we passed Caroline Walters' room, we saw that the door was standing wide open. We did not stop to examine how it had been opened—but continued our way down stairs, when we met Miss Walters rushing away from the parlour as if she was mad. On seeing us, she uttered a dreadful scream and fainted. My fellow-servant remained with her, while I went into the parlour; and there I found my poor 'missus' murdered and weltering in her blood. I raised an alarm—constables came—and Caroline Walters was given into custody."

The fellow-servant of this witness corroborated all the above details; and the surgeon who had attended Caroline at the period of her miscarriage, deposed to the irritability and dislike which the prisoner had manifested on that occasion towards Mrs. Lindley. The same surgeon had examined the body of the murdered woman; and he declared that the fatal blow had been inflicted by a sharp dagger which had penetrated the heart in such a manner that death must have been instantaneous and most probably unaccompanied by even a moan.

We must here observe that Counsellor Sharply cross-examined each of the witnesses with all the skill and tact for which the learned gentleman was so celebrated: but he failed to shake their testimony in any detail.

Mr. Peter Grumley now directed his man Mobbs to enter the witness-box; and that worthy deposed to the following effect:—

"I went over to Fore Street yesterday morning soon arter daybreak, in consequence of orders which I received from my superior,"—and here Mobbs jerked his left-hand thumb over his shoulder towards Grumley. "At the house in Fore Street," he continued, "I examined the chamber which had been occupied by the prisoner Miss Walters; and I found that the door had been opened by the removal of the lock. In fact the lock, which was inside the door, had been unscrewed and took off as clean as anythink. A knife had evidently been used as a turn-screw."

"This case," said the magistrate, as Mobbs stood down from the witness-box, "should have been heard yesterday: but it stood over until to-day in order to enable the officers to collect all the necessary evidence. Is any farther testimony forthcoming?"

"I think, your worship," said Grumley, "that you've heerd quite enough to induce your worship to commit this young gal to take her trial at the sessions."

"Have you anything to urge in behalf of your client, Mr. Sharply?" inquired the magistrate.

"I shall reserve the defence, your worship, until a future occasion," was the learned gentleman's answer.

"Then have you aught to advance, Caroline Walters," demanded the justice of the peace, "wherefore you should not be committed to take your trial on the charge of murder?"

The young girl glanced rapidly towards Grumley; and the equally vivid look of encouragement which she received from him at once dissipated any suspicions which she might have entertained relative to his sincerity when she saw how strongly and indeed overwhelmingly he had marshalled his array of evidence against her.

"I wish to speak a few words, may it please your worship," she said, in a firm tone: then, regardless of an impatient ejaculation which broke from Counsellor Sharply, who naturally feared that she was about to crown the damage already done by her imprudence, she cried in a louder and more resolute, but still musically feminine voice, "For I wish to proclaim to your worship and to all present that I am innocent—yes—innocent as an angel of this black iniquity which is imputed to me! And one word more would I speak—only one word," she continued, while a breathless silence pervaded the officials and the audience: "and that is to explain something which I cannot allow to remain another moment in doubt or mystery. You have heard that I was locked up in my chamber at Mrs. Lindley's house? But it was not so much on account of any quarrel which had taken place, as because I had expressed a desire—nay, even a determination to quit the establishment: and Mrs. Lindley had locked up my clothes and my purse in her own parlour, with a view to ren-

der me the more effectually a prisoner beneath her roof. What course, then, did I adopt? I resolved to fly stealthily;—and hence the removal of the lock from the door of my bed-chamber—hence my visit to the parlour in order to break open the cupboard where the midwife had concealed my clothes! The rest can be imagined: for you may easily conceive my horror and alarm when, on entering the parlour, I beheld the ghastly scene which made me fly away with all the speed, trepidation, and anguish of a guilty person."

Caroline Walters paused for a few moments; and the deep silence which reigned in the Court remained unbroken.

"But I have declared that I am innocent—and I can prove the truth of my averment!" she suddenly exclaimed, the strong emphasis of her words and the abruptness of her manner producing a strange excitement throughout the audience. "Yes—give me the opportunity—and I will undertake to prove my innocence within an hour!"

"And what opportunity do you require?" asked the magistrate.

"I demand permission to visit the house where the murder was committed," returned Caroline; "and to the constable who may take charge of me thither, will I show such unmistakable evidences that the deed must have been committed by another, that your worship will order me to be discharged at once."

"Can you not sufficiently instruct a constable that he may proceed to the house and obtain the testimony to which you allude?" asked the magistrate.

"No, your worship," replied the young girl, in a resolute tone: "it is absolutely necessary that I should go thither myself."

The magistrate appeared puzzled; and he consulted in whispers with his clerk for a few minutes. At length he turned towards the head constable, saying aloud, "Well, Mr. Grumley, what do you think of this singular application on the part of the prisoner?"

"It isn't for me to express an opinion in your worship's presence," responded the constable, in a deferential manner: "but if your worship chooses to order a remand until to-morrow morning, I shan't offer no sort of objection."

"And in the meantime you will take the young woman to the house in Fore Street?" said the magistrate, in a tone of half-inquiry and half-command.

"Your worship's instructions shall be attended to," answered Grumley, dexterously throwing upon the magistrate all the responsibility of the proposed step, though actually encouraging it by his observations.

"Then let the case stand remanded until to-morrow at eleven o'clock," exclaimed the magistrate, rising from his desk.

"Clear the Court!" bawled the usher;—and while the spectators poured out of one door, Caroline Walters was conducted through another by Grumley and Mobbs into an adjacent room, where refreshments were set before her.

"You have played your part uncommon well, young Miss," said Grumley; "although you did do a little more in the palavering line than I had recommended. But howsomever, we've gained our pint—and that's the principal. It's now six o'clock," he added, after consulting the huge silver watch which he drew from his fob. "Lord how time does slip away in them Courts, to be sure! But we'll stay here until about half-past eight—under pretence of letting the crowd disperse aforehand: and then we'll slip quietly off, all three of us, to Fore Street. I say, Mobbs old feller—what time is the boat to be in readiness?"

"At a quarter to nine punctiwal," was the response.

"The boat?" exclaimed Caroline Walters. "Is that intended for my escape? If so, whither do you mean to send me?" she demanded, a vague terror coming over her.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss," said Grumley, in a reassuring tone. "A boat certainly enters into our plans as a item of the arrangements: but it will be at your orders, to land you where you like. And now don't ask no more questions at present—but eat some grub and make your mind easy. Come, Mobbs, you and me will just tool a pipe and dip our beaks into this here jug of his worship's ale, until it's time to be jogging."

The two constables accordingly seated themselves near the fire which burnt in the grate; and while they smoked their pipes, Caroline Walters fell into a deep reverie upon the past, the present, and the future.

CHAPTER CXXX.

THE REVISIT TO THE MIDWIFE'S HOUSE.

It was just as the clock at the Archbishop's palace in Lambeth was chiming half-past eight, that Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs led Caroline Walters forth from the back door of the magistrate's dwelling.

The young girl had neither bonnet nor shawl—for those who had hurried her off to prison so peremptorily on the night of the murder, had not manifested the consideration or the forethought to provide her with any additional garment to her own clothing;—and thus she had nothing but her ordinary apparel to protect her against the night-air.

Neither Grumley nor Mobbs now took any notice of this circumstance until they had proceeded some short distance from the dwelling of the justice of the peace: and then, suddenly perceiving that the young girl was shivering with the cold and that her teeth were chattering violently, as she walked between himself and his companion, Grumley exclaimed, "By goles! this is too bad—the poor creatur' is well nigh starved!"

"Why didn't she eat the bread and cheese that his worship ordered to be given her?" growled Mobbs—for Caroline had refused to partake of any refreshment at the magistrate's abode.

"I don't mean that kind of starwation, you cussed fool," exclaimed Mr. Grumley. "I mean she's starved with cold."

"Oh! never mind—never mind," said the young girl, crossing her arms over her bosom. "We shall soon be there—and then I can procure some warmer apparel——"

"Well, come along, then," observed Grumley, quickening his pace: and making Caroline take his arm, he led her along at a rate which soon imparted a healthier circulation to her blood.

In ten minutes they reached Fore Street; and the door of the well known house was opened by

one of the servants who had borne evidence against Caroline at the examination.

"Ah! and so you are come here—to the house which you have made one of mourning, Miss," said the menial in a bitter tone, the instant that the light which she held in her hand threw its rays upon the countenance of Caroline.

"Silence, woman—I am innocent!" ejaculated the young girl, in a tone which made the servant feel that it might really be the truth which was thus solemnly and emphatically averred.

"Yes — silence, and let's do our work without bickering or ill-words," said Mr. Grumley. "Come now, shut the front door—that's right. Which room is it that you want to go to, Miss?" he demanded, addressing the question to Caroline Walters.

"Say your own," whispered Mobbs in her ear—the servant not catching the hint thus hastily conveyed.

"My own," accordingly exclaimed Caroline: "and I wish to be alone with the constables," she added, of her own accord.

"Good," whispered Mobbs.

"Well, then—come along," said Mr. Grumley. "Here, young 'ooman, lend us your candle," he added, as he took the light from the servant's hand. "Which is the parlour where the old lady is laid out?"

"In there," answered Mobbs, pointing to the door opening from the passage, where this conversation took place. "But I don't suppose you want to see her?"

"Not I indeed," responded Grumley. "Come, Miss Walters, you lead the way, if you please—and me and my man will foller."

Caroline accordingly ascended the stairs which appeared to creak ominously beneath her feet and those of the two men behind her; and the atmosphere of the house seemed laded with that thick, fetid, nauseating smell which so frequently denotes

the presence of a corpse. It even appeared that the very walls felt clammy as her hands touched them while she was thus ascending the staircase.

And all was silent throughout the dwelling,—all save the sounds of the footsteps of the young girl and the two constables: for the females who were lodging in the establishment at the time of the murder had sought other asylums the very morning after the terrible catastrophe.

In a few minutes Caroline Walters reached the chamber which had so lately been her own; and the two constables followed her into the room, Mobbs closing the door behind him.

"Now what is to be done?" demanded Caroline, goaded by suspense to a pitch of intolerable impatience respecting the safety and the escape which had been promised her.

"Don't be afeard, Miss," said Grumley: "all will be right in a moment. Look out, Mobbs!"

And Mobbs, noiselessly opening the window, thrust his head forth.

The night was very dark; and the Thames gurgled as its full tide swept rapidly on beneath that open casement.

A vague terror once more came upon Caroline Walters; and her startled looks wandered rapidly from Mobbs who was still leaning out of the window, to Peter Grumley who was standing in the middle of the chamber with the candle in his hand.

"It's all right," observed Mobbs, suddenly drawing in his head and turning away from the window. "The boat is about ten or a dozen yards distant."

"The boat again!" ejaculated Caroline: and she threw a terrified glance at the open casement.

"Now, young lady," said Grumley, suddenly speaking in a rapid and decisive tone, "the moment for your escape is come. Don't you see what you have done already, and what you have still got to do? You have inveigled me and my partner here on pretence of producing some proof of your innocence; and while him and me is looking another way, you opens that window softly but speedily, and you jumps clean out into the Thames!"

"O horror!" exclaimed Caroline, clasping her hands entreatingly: "would you murder me?"

"Don't be silly, gal," said Grumley in a tone which instantly recalled her to herself. "Well—you jumps out, I was observing—and me and Mobbs haven't time to save you. To-morrow all London will believe that you preferred suicide by drowning to death on the scaffold by the hand of Jack Ketch. But no one, save and except just them few as is concerned in the business, will suspect that there was a boat a-waiting in readiness close underneath this window—and that the people in the said boat picked you up and rowed away with you in a jiffey. Neither will it be imagined that in this self-same boat there was a disguise—not only in the shape of garments, but also for staining the complexion——"

"Ah! now I understand you, Mr. Grumley—and I thank you—my God! I thank you most sincerely!" exclaimed Caroline, taking the constable's hand and pressing it as warmly and as fervently as if she had just found a father in that man.

"Well, well, Miss—I hope you'll be happy—and that you'll take care and not be caught—that's all!" said the head constable. "But, by the bye, here's the fifty guineas which Mrs. Brace sent you——"

"Keep them for yourself," said Caroline, gently repulsing the bag which the officer endeavoured to force upon her.

"No—not I, Miss—thank'ee all the same," he said. "I'm both just and honest after my own fashion — and I'm well paid for all this business——"

"Not for worlds would I receive that money—since it comes from Mrs. Brace!" exclaimed Caroline, in a tone which was decisive. "And now—farewell——"

"Farewell—and good luck to you, Miss!" said Grumley, while Mobbs echoed the sentiment.

Then Caroline Walters approached the window and threw a piercing, penetrating glance into the deep obscurity which hung like a mist upon the river. But she caught a glimpse of the boat—she could even see the upturned countenance of some one watching the casement;—and, confident that it was all as Grumley had assured her, she leapt upon the window-sill—then, holding her breath tightly to suppress any ejaculation that might rise to her tongue, she sprang courageously forth.

There was a tremendous splash—and this was followed by the sounds of oars: but Grumley and Mobbs waited to hear no more—and flinging open the door, they rushed from the room, exclaiming in voices which simulated extreme terror to perfection, —"She has drowned herself! she has drowned herself!"

CHAPTER CXXXI.

BELLENDEN PRIORY.

We must now shift the scenes for a short space in order to introduce our readers to that mansion where, as George Woodfall so confidently predicted, Rose Foster experienced a cordial welcome and immediately found a home.

At the period of which we are writing, Bellenden Priory was one of the most remarkable features of interest at the West End of the metropolis,—not only in an architectural point of view, but likewise on account of its great antiquity. It stood a little way retired from the western side of the Edgeware Road, from which thoroughfare the garden was separated and indeed concealed by a high wall fronted with flint-stones. In the middle of this rude and rugged boundary there was a Gothic portico containing a massive gate studded with large nails; and a bell-pull of thick iron wire, with a deer's foot for a handle, appeared on one side of this solemn-looking entrance.

Within the boundary there was a large garden laid out in so tasteful a manner as to afford a striking relief with its modern characteristics to the mediæval style of the spacious building which stood in the midst; and on a small piece of water surrounded by picturesque grottoes, a couple of stately swans and several aquatic birds from foreign climes floated about.

The Priory itself was a large, rambling edifice—exhibiting in its different parts various kinds of architecture, according to the ages in which additions had been made to the structure. The front was comparatively modern—three storeys high, and with tall but narrow casements, each one opening on a stone balcony filled with evergreen plants. The

principal entrance consisted of oaken folding-doors standing beneath a portico, which was reached by an ascent of a dozen steps; and the marble hall within was surrounded by suits of armour and marble statues. The parapet of the façade was battlemented; and at each angle there was a low spire of slate-work.

This frontage looked towards the Edgeware Road: but the southern side of the Priory was the most ancient and had preserved its monastic appearance, with its massive walls, long and deeply-set windows, low doors, and high pointed roofs. The northern side was only two storeys high and was somewhat in the Elizabethan style of architecture; and the western portion of the Priory was a confused jumble of old towers and wooden out-houses—a portion of a cloister and a spacious stabling.

Such a large, rambling, and ill-connected edifice had necessarily several doors opening into the grounds, and likewise many passages and staircases within. But the interior was very handsomely fitted up; and all the rooms in the front part of the building were furnished in as modern a style as good taste could possibly render consistent with the architectural peculiarities of windows, cornices, chimney-pieces, and recesses. Thus the Priory was a mansion where elegance and splendour combined to ensure the existence of every comfort and luxury, without completely destroying the effect produced upon the eye and the imagination by the solemn grandeur of the structure itself.

Such was Bellenden Priory, the foundation stone of which was said to have been laid in the reign of Richard I, — that well-meaning but mistaken fanatic who was the cause of millions of lives being lost on the plains of Palestine. From the earliest date of its existence, the Priory had belonged to the Bellenden family, which was even more ancient still: for the genealogical tree traced its descent from one of the Norman ruffians who came over with William the Conqueror. But although the Priory had remained for so many centuries in the hands of the Bellendens, an intermarriage with the equally ancient family of Montgomery had by some means or other given rise to litigation respecting the ownership of the mansion and the annexed estate; and these law-suits had commenced about thirty years previously to the date of our tale. There were likewise estates in Warwickshire which had belonged to the Bellendens from generation to generation; but which were even more perilously involved than the Priory property, on account of the claims of the Montgomery family. Touching these matters, however, we shall have to treat more in detail hereafter: for the present we must speak of the Marchioness of Bellenden, the present owner of the Priory.

This lady was now in her thirty-seventh year, and was famed for her beauty, her accomplishments, and her benevolence. A glance at her early history is necessary for the purposes of our tale. She belonged to the Montgomery family, and becoming an orphan at a tender age, was left to the care of an aunt, who, being a mercenary and intriguing woman, resolved to ensure her niece a brilliant position by means of a "good marriage." Thus, scarcely had she attained her seventeenth year, when the innocent, artless, and beautiful Laura was commanded to receive the addresses of the Marquis of Bellenden—an old man in his sixty-second winter! Then there was a sad and even terrible scene between the orphan Laura and her aunt the Dowager-Countess Montgomery: and although there were no witnesses to that scene, it was nevertheless rumoured at the time that Laura had thrown herself at her aunt's feet and had confessed that her affections were already engaged. But whatever were the reasons that Laura urged against the marriage proposed on her behalf, certain it is that the Dowager-Countess Montgomery was inexorable; and it was represented to the unhappy Laura that family reasons required the tremendous sacrifice at her hands, inasmuch as the litigation which had then been in progress about ten years would be amicably settled by this second intermarriage of the two families. In short, Laura was dragged as it were to the altar; and the young creature of seventeen became the wife of the old nobleman of sixty-two! The honeymoon (such a honeymoon as it must have been!) was passed at the Bellenden estate in Warwickshire; and then the Marquis brought home his bride to the Priory. But he did not long survive this most unequal alliance into which he had forced his youthful victim; and his death took place with a suddenness which seemed to savour of a just retribution for his cruelty in blighting all the best and purest affections of her young heart. The family physician pronounced his death to have arisen from apoplexy; and the remains of the last lord of Bellenden were removed with grand funereal pomp into Warwickshire, to be interred in the family vault at the old church where all his ancestors had been laid in due succession.

The death of the Marquis of Bellenden without male issue instantaneously revived the law-suits respecting the heritage of the estates. The Marchioness however kept possession; and her opponents were the male members of the Montgomery family from which she herself was sprung. Vainly did her aunt, the Dowager-Countess, endeavour to induce her niece to come to an amicable settlement: the young widow was resolute in her refusal —for she felt that she had been basely sacrificed in the most important event of a woman's life, and she would therefore show no favour to those who had thus made her the victim of a selfishness which did not however obtain its ends. Time passed on — years rolled by — and the law-suit dragged its slow length along in that tremendous tribunal of Modern Inquisition — the Court of Chancery. The Dowager-Countess Montgomery soon grew wearied of making overtures to her niece, or else was too proud to reiterate them;— and thus at the period when we introduce the Marchioness of Bellenden to our readers, she had been a widow twenty years—she was still in possession of the Priory and the Warwickshire estates—the old Dowager was still alive—and the law-suit appeared as far off from a settlement as ever.

Yes — the Marchioness of Bellenden was now thirty-seven; and never once during her long widowhood of twenty years had she laid aside her mourning apparel. The tenacity with which she clung to it was most singular—most remarkable—most unaccountable. That she thus permanently regretted the sexagenarian who had been her husband for a few months, she herself did not for a moment pretend: in fact, as she had never loved him, and had been chained to him against her inclination and despite of her most fervent prayers

to the contrary, she could not possibly have ever regretted him at all. Nor did any measure of respect for his memory furnish a hypothesis to solve the mystery of this perseverance in maintaining the weeds of a widow; and therefore was the circumstance evidently a secret belonging to herself —and to herself alone!

Wealthy, handsome, highly accomplished, and of a reputation unsullied by even the slightest breath of scandal, the Marchioness of Bellenden had as a matter of course received many offers of marriage during her long widowhood: but she had refused them each and all, though some were of a nature so eligible as to have appeared beyond the possibility of experiencing a negative. And on those occasions, when thus pressed for a decision in so delicate and important a matter as an invitation to change her condition once more, she would glance significantly but not hypocritically down at her mourning garb, and observe with a singular and almost martyrised air of resolution that she had determined to carry those weeds throughout her earthly career, unto the threshold of the grave itself!

In personal appearance the Marchioness of Bellenden was a woman who could not fail to create a feeling of interest even in the mind of the most callous observer of the female sex. She was tall—well-formed — slightly inclining to *embonpoint* — but characterised by so much elegance and grace that every attitude and every movement had its own peculiar charm. Her bust was of full and voluptuous proportions: the slope of her shoulders was admirable;—and her arms, though robust, were exquisitely symmetrical and dazzlingly white. But the high corsage and the long sleeves veiled the superb neck and the polished arms: yet the beauty of the throat and the faultless formation of the snowy hands, aided also by the shape which the black dress took from the rich contours of the bosom, allowed ample scope for the exercise of delicious imaginings in respect to the charms thus modestly concealed.

The countenance of the Marchioness of Bellenden was very handsome; and its beauty was so well preserved that, despite even of the widow's weeds which certainly have a tendency to mar the appearance of youthfulness, she did not seem to be more than thirty. Her eyes were large and of a soft liquid blue: her hair, which she wore in bands and did not permit the close-fitting cap altogether to conceal, was of a dark chesnut—not particularly luxuriant, but with a gloss shining on its surface as the lustre of a lamp displays the richness of velvet;—her teeth were white as ivory and faultlessly even;—and there was a vermilion freshness upon the lips which must inevitably have made the admirer of the sex think within himself how great was the pity if no tender kisses were ever more to be gathered there!

The manners of the Marchioness of Bellenden were not too elegant to be cordial nor too fashionably refined to be winning: elegant and refined they assuredly were—but not with that glacial formality, chilling reserve, and ceremonial haughtiness which seems to calculate the distance between individuals with a view to decide what amount of civility may be vouchsafed or how much cold constraint is to be assumed. No—Lady Bellenden knew full well how to manifest that graceful condescension which made her inferiors feel at their ease in her presence; while to her equals she exhibited an affability and amiability which, though always as it were showing through a certain settled melancholy alike of expression and manner, nevertheless endeared her to all her friends and acquaintances.

Such was the Marchioness of Bellenden — the lady to whose care George Woodfall introduced the orphan Rose Foster!

And, as he had foretold, cordial—most cordial was the welcome which the much-persecuted girl experienced at the hands of the benevolent lady. An elegant chamber was assigned to Rose on the southern side of the Priory; and when she awoke on the following morning a milliner with a quantity of ready-made apparel was introduced into her presence. New and excellent raiment for the orphan's immediate use was thus provided; and the dress-maker had the orders of the Marchioness to take Miss Foster's commands for the completion of everything that was necessary for her toilette.

In the afternoon George Woodfall called at the Priory to pay his respects to the Marchioness and inquire concerning the health of Rose;—and her ladyship insisted that he should stay to dinner. Thus at the time that poor Caroline Walters was undergoing the examination before the Lambeth magistrate, Rose Foster was conversing with the Marchioness and the young artist in one of the elegantly-furnished parlours of Bellenden Priory.

CHAPTER CXXXII.

THE AMOROUS CONSTABLE.

THE clocks at the West End were striking eleven when Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs stopped at the door of Mrs. Brace's establishment in Pall Mall.

"Now I shall say good night to you, old feller," observed the head constable to his factotum: "'cause I promised to call and let Mrs. Brace know that the young gal had succeeded in escaping. And besides," added Mr. Grumley, lowering his voice to a significant whisper, "she's a uncommon pleasant lady, is Mrs. Brace—and I shan't mind a spending half-an-hour or so with her."

"Well, I wish you luck, Mr. Grumley," said Mobbs. "We shall meet in the mornin' at the Office. Good night, sir."

"Good night," repeated Grumley, as he knocked at Mrs. Brace's door, while Mobbs hurried away to his own abode.

The summons of the head constable was almost immediately answered by the discreet lady's-maid Harriet; and he was forthwith ushered into the parlour where the milliner was anxiously awaiting his arrival.

Harriet withdrew; and the moment the door closed behind her, Mrs. Brace demanded in a quick tone, "What news?—have you succeeded?"

"Everythink as right as a trivet, ma'am," was the prompt reply: for Mr. Grumley saw that the lady was labouring under considerable suspense.

"Caroline is at liberty?" she exclaimed.

"As free as you and me, ma'am," rejoined the head constable; "and as safe too, if so be she has made proper use of the disguise which was provided for her."

"Which she has no doubt done," observed Mrs.

Brace, from whose mind a tremendous weight had been suddenly taken by the welcome intelligence received from the constable. "But pray be seated —and help yourself to whatever you fancy," she observed, pointing towards a chair and glancing at the table on which there were decanters of wine and the spirit-stand.

"Thank'ee, ma'am," said Grumley: "and with your permission I'll mix myself a glass of hot brandy-and-water just to take the chill out of my stomach."

"Do so," returned Mrs. Brace; and tell me all that has occurred to-day."

"The thing has been managed as nice as possible," said Mr. Grumley, after having taken two or three experimental sips at the grog which he had just brewed; and smacking his lips in unalloyed approval of the beverage, he continued thus: —"I all along knowed the evidence was so dead against her that it would be impossible to get her off by fair means; and I told you as much yesterday evening at Bow Street. So I had a plan cut and dried to save her by stratagem. In short, I resolved that she should ask the magistrate to let her visit the house in Fore Street for the purpose of procuring testimony to prove her innocence; and when once there, I was determined that she should either jump out of the winder of her own accord—or else I meant to put her out."

"Good God!" ejaculated the milliner, trembling all over and gasping for breath: "you do not mean to say—that is—you would not have me believe that —that you—murdered her?"

"There wasn't no necessity for *that*, ma'am," answered Grumley. "The winder, as p'raps you know, looks on the Thames—and my plan was to have a boat in readiness to pick the young gal up—and a disguise in the boat for her to assume without delay."

"And was this extraordinary plan realized?" demanded Mrs. Brace, shuddering as she fancied she beheld the unfortunate girl Caroline Walters struggling in the waters of the rapid stream.

"Realized—and with triumphant success, as they say upon the play-bills," answered Grumley. "Miss Walters jumped out as courageous as a diver and as light as a cat—and the boat picked her up in a moment. Then me and my man Mobbs rushed out of the room—raised an alarm—and pretended to be quite distracted at the hawful occurrence. We got a wherry as soon as we could—made the boatmen pull us up and down along the shore—but of course couldn't discover any trace of the young lady; and so we pretended to give up the search in despair."

"And the impression will be that she was drowned?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Just so, my dear madam," replied Grumley, throwing an amorous look on the milliner as he drank his brandy-and-water. "The newspapers will have a long and pathetic account of the business; and in fact it all looks natural enow. A young gal driven to desperation—sees that she is sure to be committed for trial—if committed, knows that she will be found guilty—if found guilty, is well convinced that she'll be hung; and so to prevent all these unpleasantnesses, hits upon the ingenious trick of getting herself taken to Fore Street, where she's well aware that the means of suicide is within her reach—'cause why, the river rolls under the winder. There it is all in a nut-shell—and a wery pathetic, romantic, and affecting history it makes."

"But will you not be compromised?" asked Mrs. Brace.

"Not a atom," returned Grumley, with a sly laugh: "I took all my measures too well to leave the door open for any suspicion against me. When I went to fetch the young gal away from the prison a little before one to-day, I remarked to the turnkey in a careless, off-hand way that she was sure to be committed, as I had got up a precious strong case against her. So *he* wouldn't think that I was at all friendly disposed towards her. Then I really did produce an overwhelming force of testimony against her; and I myself was the fust to ask the magistrate to commit her, before he himself or his clerk had uttered an opinion on the subject. Again, when Miss Walters requested permission to visit the house in Fore Street, I wouldn't appear to help her at all in the matter: on the contrary, I managed to throw all the responsibility of the proceedings on the justice of the peace himself. In short, I played my cards so well, ma'am, that I can't possibly be blamed."

"Not for allowing her to escape from your custody?" said Mrs. Brace.

"To be sure not!" ejaculated Grumley. "Suppose, now, that me and my man Mobbs had let her run away from us while we were taking her to the house in Fore Street—*then* indeed the world might have said that we were either bribed or that we showed a most unpardonable negligence. But when once we got the girl in safety into the house, who could have supposed that she would suddenly open a casement and flings herself into the Thames below? Don't you see the difference, ma'am?"—and as Mr. Grumley asked this question, he winked his eye knowingly.

"I now comprehend the full meaning and force of your precaution," observed the milliner. "And during the examination before the magistrate, was anything said at all calculated to compromise——"

"You or your establishment, ma'am?" exclaimed Grumley, who, perceiving that the lady hesitated, finished the sentence for her. "Not a word—not a syllable, I can assure you. In fact, *I* put a stop to all that, my dear madam, when I was taking the young gal along to the magistrate's house."

"Ah! then she did threaten?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, inquiringly: for she was anxious to learn how far the revelations of Caroline Walters might have extended.

"Well—she did threaten a many things, ma'am," said Mr. Grumley, surveying the milliner with looks so full of unmistakable grossness that she began to be not only disgusted but likewise alarmed. "It ain't however of no use wexing yourself on that account, my dear creatur'," added the constable.

"Oh! no—not at all," ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "But I will now hand you over the remaining moiety of the promised reward," she observed, starting from her seat.

And as she crossed the room to open the writing-desk which stood on a side-table, Mr. Grumley followed her with his eyes; and the rustling of her silk dress—the glimpse which he caught of her robust but well-turned ankles and her very genteelly shaped feet—the gleaming of her white neck and arms in the lamp-light—and the coquettish French cap so admirably becoming the milliner's style of beauty,—all these produced an indescribable

effect upon Mr. Grumley's sensations — and his blood, inflamed alike by lust and potent liquor, appeared to boil in his veins.

The milliner took from her writing-desk a number of Bank-notes; and when she returned to her seat, she was more profoundly struck and more seriously alarmed than at first by the singular expression of countenance with which Mr. Grumley regarded her: and although she was well experienced in all the looks and glances which constitute an index to the strong, fiery, or libidinous passions of the soul, yet her vanity would scarcely permit her to believe that the coarse, vulgar, ill-favoured, and sordidly-apparelled police-constable could possibly aspire to any tender concession on her part.

"Here is your money, Mr. Grumley," she said, affecting a pleasant but patronising smile: then, the more firmly to impress upon his mind the fact that she regarded him as an inferior whom she was paying for his hireling services, she observed, "You have really well earned the amount—and I have every reason to be satisfied with your conduct. I could not possibly have employed a better agent in the matter."

"I'm glad you're satisfied, my dear creatur'," returned the constable, squeezing her hand as he took the Bank-notes which she gave him, and accompanying that evidence of his admiration by a look of amorous grossness.

Mrs. Brace drew back her hand rapidly, and assumed so severe an expression of countenance that Mr. Peter Grumley could not help observing that she was offended: but he only laughed—and then proceeded to count the Bank-notes with a business-like deliberation.

"Right as a trivet," he exclaimed when this methodical task was accomplished: and securing the money about his person, he fixed his eyes long and earnestly on the milliner's countenance. "You're a wery handsome woman—a wery handsome woman," he repeated; "and I don't know when I've been so much excited by any lady's personal appearance. In fact, I feel all over no-how, ma'am—and that's God's truth."

"Mr. Grumley, I am surprised at you," said the milliner, her cheeks becoming scarlet. "But you cannot mean anything save a joke," she exclaimed, instantaneously recovering her presence of mind and forcing herself to smile.

"By goles! I never was less inclined to joke in all my life, my dear creatur'," cried Mr. Grumley. "There seems to be a wery devil in my heart and hell-fire in my blood, prompting me to do anythink desperate, so as——"

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the milliner, starting from her seat in alarm: for the eyes of the constable appeared to devour her with their looks of burning lust.

"I mean, my dear beautiful creatur'," said Grumley, also quitting his chair and extending his arms towards her,—"that I *must* and *will* have a kiss—even if I die for it!"

And before Mrs. Brace could offer any resistance or even give utterance to a word of remonstrance, she was locked in the rude embrace of the herculean constable, and his coarse mouth was fastened to her own luscious lips.

"Now will you leave me?" she said in a rapid and excited tone, as he at length relinquished his hold upon her: and, trembling all over with rage and with a countenance that showed its deadly pallor even through the soft tint of rouge that was wont to render her cheeks so captivating with its roseate bloom, she clung to the mantel-piece for support.

"Leave you!—no—by heavens, I won't leave you till to-morrow morning!" exclaimed Grumley, maddened with the contact of the milliner's lips, the sweets of which he had just enjoyed, and longing once more to feel the warm pressure of her glowing bosom against his chest.

"This is an insolence — unsupportable — intolerable!" gasped Mrs. Brace, her eyes actually becoming haggard with mingled alarm and horror as she read upon the countenance of the officer all the ferocity of those passions which were raging in his soul: then all on a sudden she extended her hand with frantic desperation towards the bell-pull.

But Grumley, anticipating the movement, once more caught her in his arms; and, in spite of her desperate struggles — for she feared to alarm the whole house by shrieking for help—he succeeded in imprinting a dozen kisses upon her lips that were now parched with rage, and on her cheeks that were burning from the same emotion.

Almost annihilated by the intolerable disgust arising from these odious caresses, and by the terrible apprehensions which the rabid lasciviousness of the monster's manner and looks excited in her brain, the milliner sank, breathless and exhausted, upon a seat.

"Now, listen to me," said the constable, speaking with the hot breath and parched tongue of a brutal lust. "I've taken a fancy to you—and I'm determined to gratify my whim. I know you ain't over particular yourself—and I also know that a strange man's sleeping in your house won't be any unusual thing. So, let us have no palaver——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the miserable Mrs. Brace, her tongue unlocking through the very poignancy of her despair: "that ungrateful Caroline Walters has vilified me and my establishment—I see it all!"

"Well, she did tell me a few plain truths, my dear creatur'," observed Grumley: "but not more than I had guessed beforehand. For the instant that you made me go with you to the Prince, and when I found that his Royal Highness was so very much interested in you, and so anxious that them young gals should be got off,—oh! oh! thought I to myself——"

"Enough! enough" cried Mrs. Brace in a tone of almost abject entreaty. "Tell me what sum of money you *now* require to induce you to leave me at once."

"Lord bless your dear heart," returned Mr. Grumley, "what a mercenary son of a gun you must take me to be! But I should be ashamed to receive another suverin at your hands—whereas I *do* mean to help myself to no end of kisses."

"Dare not approach me again—or I will alarm the house!" said Mrs. Brace, in a hoarse, thick, and rapid tone, while her hands were clenched until the nails of her fingers almost penetrated the plump white flesh.

"My dear angel, a chap as is accustomed to grapple with thieves and the most desperatest waggabones, isn't likely to be afeard of a pretty woman's anger," said Grumley. "So let us have no more nonsense—it's only delaying pleasure—and my resolution's fixed to pass the night with you——"

"Good God! is it possible?" moaned Mrs. Brace, sinking back in her chair.

But ere another word was spoken, the door opened hastily—and Harriet the lady's-maid entered the room.

"What is the matter?" demanded the milliner, instantaneously recalled to herself by the sudden and almost precipitate appearance of her faithful abigail.

"A person wishes to see you, ma'am—nay, insists upon forcing herself into your presence," replied Harriet. "She will take no refusal——"

"But who is she?" asked Mrs. Brace, relieved from the first dreadful fear that it was her husband who thus demanded an audience.

"That woman, you know, ma'am—who came here one morning and sent up a letter—when you were engaged with Lord Florimel, ma'am—you remember," added the lady's-maid, speaking with hesitation on account of Grumley.

"Here I am to answer for myself," said a voice just outside the door: and immediately afterwards a young woman, dressed with great plainness, entered the room.

"The Gallows' Widow, by goles!" exclaimed Grumley, springing towards her.

An ejaculation of mingled surprise and terror burst from the lips of Elizabeth Marks—for she it indeed was: and she made a desperate effort to break from the grasp which the constable had fixed upon her.

But wrenching round her arm with a violence that made her sink almost upon her knees, he said in a savage tone, "Be quiet—or I'll do you a mischief!"

And the woman, completely overpowered, attempted no farther resistance.

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CHAPTER CXXXIII.

A COMPROMISE.

Mrs. Brace had not failed to recognise Elizabeth Marks the instant her looks fell upon the pale but far from ill-favoured countenance of that woman whom she knew to be her husband's mistress. And here we should observe that the Gallows' Widow was not attired in her wonted apparel of mourning weeds: for she had laid aside that too distinctive dress ever since she became notoriously implicated in the affair of Joe Warren's escape from Newgate. Nevertheless, it was easy to recognise her, now that the dark veil which she wore to conceal her countenance was lifted from those pale features;—and thus a mortal terror was carried to the soul of Mrs. Brace at the very same instant that Peter Grumley pounced upon the Gallows' Widow and made her his prisoner.

For the milliner now perceived at a glance all the variety and menacing nature of those difficulties which had suddenly sprung up around her. Elizabeth Marks knew that her real name was *Warren*, and that she was in sooth the wife of the redoubtable Magsman; and these facts she might blurt forth in the presence of Grumley. Nay, more—she might even proclaim Mrs. Brace's complicity in the escape of the Magsman from Newgate; and thus the reputation, the honour, and even the personal safety of the unhappy milliner would be so completely in the power of the Bow Street Officer that she would not dare return a negative to any favour he might ask of a tender nature, or any extortion he might practise in a pecuniary point of view.

Nor did Mr. Grumley fail to observe the stupor of consternation which seized upon Mrs. Brace the moment her eyes encountered the Gallows' Widow;—and even if he had not noticed any such emotion on the part of the milliner, he could not have failed, from the mere fact of the visit of such a woman as Elizabeth Marks, to draw inferences by no means favourable to her private character.

"Well, this is a most extraordinary interruption to a wery pleasant little conversation which you and me, ma'am, was having together," said the Bow Street Officer, winking his eye with a half-amorous and half-malicious significancy at Mrs. Brace.

"Of what offence is this young woman accused?" demanded the milliner, summoning to her aid all her mental courage and firmness.

"It's well knowed, ma'am," replied the constable, still retaining his hold upon the prisoner, "that she's long been in connexion with a desperate set of fellows; and there's three or four things I can bring for'ard against her. But I don't want to be too hard upon her—and so I shall only accuse her of having aided and abetted in the escape of one Joe Warren from Newgate——"

"He picks out *that* offence, ma'am," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, darting a look of mingled hatred and contempt upon the constable,—"because there's a reward of fifty guineas offered for the apprehension of the woman who intimidated and overawed the household of old Shrubsole the picture-dealer, on the night when Joseph Warren performed the feat that has made his name as famous as Jack Sheppard's. And that woman for whom fifty guineas are offered——"

"Is yourself, Lizzy Marks," exclaimed Grumley: "and so you need not attempt to deny it."

"On the contrary, I glory in it," rejoined the Gallows' Widow. "But take care of yourself, Mr. Grumley: it will prove in the long run an evil day for you when you began to make war upon the band to which I belong."

"We shall see all about that, my dear," observed the constable, in a tone of self-satisfaction. "Come, now—let us be off——"

"Mrs. Brace," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, "pay this fellow fifty guineas—and he will let me go."

"Not I, indeed!" ejaculated Grumley.

"Yes—but you will, though," returned Elizabeth Marks. "Mrs. Brace—you know that I can speak out about certain things if I like——"

"Silence, woman!" ejaculated the milliner in a tone that was rather hysterically sharp than imperiously prompt. "Mr. Grumley," she immediately said, turning towards the constable, "I should wish to avoid the scandal that will be entailed upon my establishment by the exposure of the fact that this woman was arrested while paying a visit to me. At the same time," added Mrs. Brace, "I would not have you think that I am in any way intimidated——"

"Well, well," exclaimed the constable, perceiving the smile of mingled malice and triumph which slowly wreathed the lips of the Gallows' Widow,—"I see that it *would* be unpleasant if the world was to know that Elizabeth Marks, *alias* the Gallows' Widow, was on such familiar terms of intimacy with Mrs. Brace, the fashionable dress-maker of

Pall Mall, that she could introduce herself at all hours into her friend's presence."

The milliner listened in dismay to this speech, which the constable delivered in a measured and significant tone: for it was as much as to intimate that *he*—Peter Grumley—had now indeed got *her*—the fashionable milliner—completely into his power. And Elizabeth Marks, whose natural keenness enabled her to perceive that some compromise was about to be suggested by the Bow Street Officer in her behalf, chuckled with that species of low, inward laugh which invariably sounded ominous and made the blood run cold, no matter on whose ears it fell.

"Yes," resumed Mr. Grumley, after a brief pause during which he watched with satisfaction the effect that his previous speech had produced upon the milliner,—"it *would* be unpleasant for the world to know that the Gallows' Widow was on such intimate terms in Pall Mall; and the magistrate might even think it necessary to send for Mrs. Brace and demand explanations on that point."

"Enough—enough, Mr. Grumley!" ejaculated the wretched milliner. "Name the conditions upon which you will suffer this woman to take her departure."

"And you will comply with 'em?" demanded the officer, interrogatively.

"She will not dare refuse," said the Gallows' Widow, in that quiet tone which actually imparted to the observation more weight and a deeper meaning than if it had been uttered with ejaculatory excitement.

"Speak, sir—be quick—and let us put an end to this scene," said Mrs. Brace, trembling all over and speaking in a voice that was painfully agitated, despite the desperate efforts which she made to preserve her self-possession: but every look which was darted upon her by either Grumley or the Gallows' Widow, and every word which fell from their mouths, carried with a more poignant intensity to the soul of the miserable woman the harrowing conviction that she was utterly and totally in the power of both.

"Madam," observed Elizabeth Marks, again speaking in her quiet manner, "it is very evident from what Mr. Grumley has said that *he* is disposed to assent to a compromise on my behalf—and therefore any delay which arises will be caused only by *you*."

"That's true enough," exclaimed the Bow Street Officer. "And now for the conditions that I have to propose."

"Speak!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, with a nervous irritability which showed how tensely her feelings were strung.

"In the first place," said Mr. Grumley, "you will pay me, ma'am, the fifty guineas which I lose by letting this young 'ooman escape me?"

"Agreed!" exclaimed the milliner. "What next?"

"And you will consent," rejoined the constable, "to the little favour I was asking you just at the very moment when the servant came into the room to announce the Gallows' Widow."

The lascivious twinkling of Grumley's eyes and the blush of indignation and shame which all in a moment overspread the countenance of Mrs. Brace, revealed to the keen perception and far-sighted experience of Elizabeth Marks the nature of the favour to which allusion had just been made;—and the expression of mingled satire, malicious glee, and subdued astonishment which instantaneously appeared upon the woman's pale features, struck the milliner in her turn, making her aware that the Gallows' Widow had penetrated into the nature of the constable's pretensions.

"My God!" almost screamed forth the wretched milliner, her feelings now goaded to the verge of desperation: "would that I were dead—dead!"

And she repeated the word with a frightful emphasis.

"Compose yourself, madam," said Elizabeth Marks, with characteristic coolness. "You cannot *now* accuse Mr. Grumley of protracting this unpleasant scene."

"Let us put an end to it at once!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, now speaking with the firmness of one who has suddenly taken a desperate resolution. "Mr. Grumley, I agree to the conditions."

"Capital!" ejaculated the officer: and he released the hold which throughout this scene he had retained upon his captive.

"I thank you, madam, for having purchased my freedom," said the Gallows' Widow, but speaking in a tone of quiet and subdued satire instead of gratitude. "The business which brought me here to-night is of no great importance. I merely wanted a little money: but as you have so generously undertaken to pay the fifty guineas to this cormorant constable, I shall not ask you for any more—especially as in your anxiety to serve me, you have agreed to *another* condition which, I see full well, is by no means palatable. However," added Elizabeth Marks, suffering the irony of her tone to become more apparent,—"when the fashionable, exquisite, and elegant milliner of Pall Mall contemptuously designated me as '*that woman*,' she did not foresee how fully and completely she herself was destined to be humiliated in the presence of the very female whom she thus scorned, loathed, and despised. Farewell, madam—and may you pass a pleasant night."

With these words the Gallows' Widow quitted the room, her low chuckling laugh sounding with a species of sepulchral omen upon the ears of Mrs. Brace, who, already crushed and overwhelmed by the withering satire which had been levelled at her, sank half-fainting into the nearest chair.

CHAPTER CXXXIV.

THE GLASS OF LIQUEUR.

TEN minutes had elapsed since the departure of the Gallows' Widow; and a profound silence reigned throughout the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall.

The door of the parlour was now opened cautiously; and Mrs. Brace came forth, holding a light in her hand, and followed by Peter Grumley.

The countenance of the unhappy woman was of a ghastly pallor, which, as before stated, showed through the roseate tint which art had shed upon her cheeks: but in the settled frown stamped on her forehead—the corrugated brows—the fixed stare of the eyes—the compressed lips—and the upheaved, motionless bosom,—there was evinced a sternness of purpose which would have filled the constable's mind with terrible misgivings had not his brain become

confused with a large potation of brandy wherein he had indulged immediately after the departure of the Gallows' Widow. His countenance was therefore flushed—his eyes were blood-shot—and his lips were wreathed into a vacant smile of drunken satisfaction and tipsy triumph,—his appearance thus presenting a remarkable contrast with that of the determined and desperate woman who now conducted him as cautiously as she could up the staircase to her own bed-chamber.

But the carpetted stairs creaked beneath the heavy and uneven steps of the constable, and his bulky form occasionally reeled against the balustrade, thereby producing a cracking sound in the wood-work; and in rapid, low, but severe—nay, almost savage whispers, did Mrs. Brace enjoin him to be careful how he alarmed and aroused the entire household.

At length the chamber was reached—and Mr. Peter Grumley was introduced into that temple of voluptuousness whither the milliner was wont at times to admit her favoured elect.

Throwing himself upon a chair, the constable cast his eyes around the chamber, every feature of which he surveyed with that semi-vacancy which characterises the looks of a man who has taken a drop too much: but when his eyes settled upon the downy bed, with its linen of snowy whiteness and its pillows soft and luxurious even to the view, all the fury of his animal passions rekindled with consuming ardour.

Rising from his seat, he caught the milliner in his arms; and, straining her in his uncouth embrace, he pressed his parched and heated lips to her own. Then, resuming the chair, he forced her to sit upon his knees, while he began to toy with her bosom.

"You are uncommon handsome, my dear," he murmured, in a voice rendered more than naturally thick and hoarse by the desires which were devouring him; "and I knowed you wouldn't play the

cruel when once we came to a good understanding together."

"You seem to be thirsty—your lips are dry—your tongue is parched," said Mrs. Brace, who had thus far abandoned herself to the odious toyings of the constable because it suited her purpose to *appear* thus docile, calm, and resigned.

"Well, I am athirst," he responded, rolling his feverish tongue over his cracking lips.

"I have wine, spirits, and liqueurs in that cupboard," said the milliner, gently disengaging herself from his arms and re-arranging the corsage of her dress.

"You're exceedin' kind, my dear," observed Grumley, fixing upon her his looks of the grossest, most brutal lasciviousness. "Suppose you give me a little wine-and-water fust, to squench this terrible thirst;—and then I'll take a sip of——what d'ye call them last things you spoke of——"

"Liqueurs," responded the milliner, whose manner was glacial and passionless as her tone was cold and meaningless. "Here are curaçoa, noyau, golden water, and Dantzic brandy."

"Well, my dear, I leave it all to you to choose me a glass of the best of them stuffs," returned the constable; "for I can't say as how I ever tasted any of them. So let us have the wine-and-water fust—the what-d'ye-call-it next—and then to bed in a jiffey."

Mrs. Brace opened the cupboard and speedily mixed a tumbler of sherry and cold water, which she handed to the constable. She then returned to the cupboard, where she remained for nearly a minute; and, on accosting Grumley again, she held in her hand a small glass filled with noyau, the almond-flavour of which was diffused through the chamber.

"How beautiful that smells!" exclaimed Mr. Grumley, placing upon a table the tumbler which he had drained and receiving the liqueur-glass from the milliner's plump white hand.

"Noyau always has the perfume of almonds," she observed; and her lips, which were now ashy white, quivered slightly.

"Your health, my love," said the constable, raising his eyes and the glass at the same time. "Come—you may begin to undress yourself," he added with coarse jocularity.

"I am your slave for this night, according to agreement," returned the milliner, taking off her coquettish French cap.

"You look handsomer than ever," exclaimed the constable. "Once more, my love, here's to your health."

And Peter Grumley tossed the noyau down his capacious throat.

But during the instant that elapsed while his countenance was thus upturned and the glass was at his lips, he caught a glimpse of the features of Mrs. Brace—and it struck him that an expression of fiendish malignity and diabolical triumph had suddenly sprung up thereon.

This thought was as rapid as the lightning is vivid; and it was the last which ever flashed through the brain of the Bow Street Officer!

For even as the liqueur was gliding with its luscious smoothness and oily richness down his throat, the glass fell from his hand—a strong spasm shot through his whole frame—and life was already extinct as he toppled for a moment on his chair ere he rolled a heavy corpse upon the carpet!

For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace stand gazing upon the body of that man whom she had thus sacrificed to her feelings of abhorrence in respect to the present and of terror with regard to the future: for it was not so much to escape his loathsome embraces of this night that she had murdered him, as to save herself from becoming his victim at every hour and at every moment when it might suit his phantasy and please his lustful inclinations thereafter.

Yes—for nearly a minute did she gaze upon the form which was so lately endowed with a robust and vigorous health, and which now lay like a mere bundle of clothes at her feet. No—not exactly like anything so little calculated to inspire emotions of terror: for the ghastly countenance of death—was it not *there?*

Oh! yes;—and now an awful consternation began to grow upon the wretched woman—and the clock of St. James's Church suddenly struck *one*, as if to remind her with that solemn sound and at that solemn hour, *that she was alone in her chamber with the corse of her murdered victim!*

Then—oh! then—how bitterly, deeply, profoundly did she repent of the act which she had perpetrated,—not so much on account of the enormity of the crime itself, but because it appeared to have suddenly raised up in her path a thousand embarrassments of a magnitude which she could not see any possibility of surmounting! Oh! better, better far would it have been, she now thought, to surrender herself to the loathsome embraces of the wretch, and even incur every chance and every risk of having to prostitute herself to him in the same way wherever it should suit his caprice and his fancy for the future! Yes—better were it to have become the slave of his beastly lusts and the victim of his odious passions altogether, rather than to have taken the *one* tremendous step which could not be recalled, and which in a moment as it were placed her within view of the black and looming scaffold!

Such were her reflections—but, great heaven! how useless now! For *there*—at her feet—on the carpet of her own bed-chamber, lay the corpse of the murdered man!

For an instant she thought of committing suicide: but her soul sickened at the idea of self-destruction! And yet the means were ready at hand—for there was still left a large dose of Prussic acid in that phial whence she had poured a few drops into the fatal glass of noyau! Yes—the means were ready: the inclination even prompted;—but the courage was wanting to complete all the elements necessary for the appalling tragedy of suicide!

And yet what was to be done? The corpse was *there*—and it must be disposed of. But where could it be concealed?—where buried? And was Mrs. Brace able to adopt any decisive step without assistance? No—it was impossible;—and the wretched woman, seating herself upon a chair, covered her face with her hands and gave way to all the bitterness of her harrowing reflections.

Alone with a corpse!—this was the appalling conviction that was uppermost in her mind. In a few minutes she felt a cold shudder—a glacial tremor—stealing over her;—and it struck her disordered fancy that some terrible phantom had risen slowly nd noiselessly up before her and was gazing upon

her with its dull, glassy, lustreless eyes. Then she abruptly removed her hands from her countenance; and her looks, wild with apprehension, were cast swiftly round the room—settling irresistibly at length upon the corpse that lay stretched on the floor.

The murderess started to her feet. Was she the sport of some horrible vision—the victim of some hideous night-mare?—or was it really true that she had killed a human being—and that the corpse was *there—at her feet?* Once more she carried her hands to her head—but it was not this time to cover her face: no—it was to press her fingers to her throbbing brows and thereby steady her thoughts, if possible. For her brain — Oh! it reeled — it reeled;—and those thoughts—Oh! they whirled—they whirled;—and it seemed as if her scalp had been torn off and some demon was pouring molten lead upon the palpitating, seething, quivering cerebral mass! Just heaven! her punishment had already begun on earth—and the red right arm of God was already stretched out to avenge that foul and atrocious murder!

Alone with the corpse of her victim! Oh!—this was the conviction that hemmed her in with an adamantine wall, and imbued with its own harrowing influence all the thoughts which swept through her brain and all the emotions which rolled their tidal fury through her breast. Was it possible that she could have been so mad—so insane—so rabid—so foolish, as to perpetrate a deed which thus conjured up a myriad perils to environ her, as if with a host of insatiate demons panting for her destruction—her ruin—her blood! But, hark!—what sound was that which made her start so convulsively? Was it a guttural moan from the throat of the corpse at her feet?—was it the wail of the restless spirit which had only been parted a few minutes from its mortal tenement?—or was it the voice of some unearthly being responding in mockery or in sympathy, to that tremendous eloquence of silent anguish and noiseless despair which filled the heart of the murderess? She listened—all was still—a profound tranquillity reigned throughout the house;—and in her own chamber it was indeed the stupendous silence of *death!*

Her imagination, then, had deceived her—and no sound had in reality reached her ears. But this stillness—this silence—oh! it was now becoming intolerable: it was something which began to weigh upon her heart like lead—it was not a mere *absence* of sound—it was the *presence* of an influence too mysterious to describe and too tremendous to endure. Oh! it seemed as if everything were now sepulchral that met her eyes in the yellow lustre of the night-lamp! She looked towards the bed: its snowy whiteness appalled her—for it appeared as if she were gazing on her own winding-sheet! She turned her eyes towards the windows—the drapery seemed to have a dark, funereal gloom! Her looks dwelt for an instant on a tall narrow clothes'-press of dark mahogany—and her fevered fancy represented it as an upright case containing skeletons! Once more her eyes turned wildly towards the casement—and there were they rivetted with dread horror: for it appeared to the appalled imagination of the unhappy woman that between the opening of the window-curtains she beheld the marble countenance of a corpse looking in upon her! For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace maintain her eyes fixed, in awful consternation, upon that phantom of her brain's creation: and all the while her tongue was locked as if by paralysis—and her limbs were deprived of motion—and she was like a statue that could *feel!* But at length her terror reached that point when she must either scream out or avert her eyes—and it was this latter species of relief which she was enabled to grant unto her own agonising soul. And then—O horror!—as she suddenly and shudderingly withdrew her looks from the *ideal* face of the dead at the window, they fell upon the *real one* which seemed to gaze up at her with its fixed and stony eyes as the corpse lay stretched upon the carpet!

A moan of indescribable anguish now burst from the lips of the wretched woman; and once more did she cover her countenance with her hands to shut out the appalling object from her view. But during the few moments that she thus veiled her physical vision, her feverish fancy acquired ten thousand times more activity than ever—and her imagination conjured up myriads of frightful shapes and terrific forms to harrow her with all the dread phantasmagoria of the grave! Then, unable to endure this exquisite refinement of torture, she opened her eyes again—and again did they irresistibly settle upon the face of that corpse with which she was thus *alone!*

Goaded almost to madness — feeling that her senses were abandoning her—and yet not daring to fly from the room nor to summon assistance, the miserable woman once more caught eagerly at the idea of suicide which flashed back into her heated brain;—and, rushing to the cupboard she was about to seize upon the phial of Prussic acid, when her unquiet conscience made her fling a startled glance to her right and to her left as she was about to commit this new crime. And then—with an ineffable aggravation of all the horror which previously filled her soul—did she suddenly become transfixed to the spot, while her entire frame grew all in a moment paralysed and petrified: for the furtive look which she had thrown around was arrested once again by the phantom face that her disordered imagination depicted as gazing in upon her through the window!

So strong was the delusion that during the minute which elapsed while Mrs. Brace was thus held in statue-like thraldom, unable to stir a limb—unable to give utterance to a sound — unable also to withdraw her eyes from that object of terrible attraction—during this minute of an appalling fascination, we say, her mind exercised an activity and an inventiveness which only added to the horrors of her thoughts and enhanced the poignancy of her mental excruciation. For the face which thus seemed to be looking in upon her, took all the ghastly lineaments of the grave: its flesh was of that yellowish white which marks the corpse—its eyes were fixed with stony, lustreless, and yet not altogether inexpressive glare—its black brows were strongly pencilled above the deep cavernous sockets wherein the glassy orbs were set—and the lips were thin and of a blueish pallor. All these characteristics did the horror-stricken woman behold—or rather fancy that she beheld: for the entire portraiture, with its supernal vividness, was nothing more than the offspring of her own disordered fancy. But at length unable any longer to endure the contemplation of an object which to *her* had all the appearance and produced all the effects of the sternest reality, she burst as it were

from the moral tetanos which held her spell-bound; and clapping her hands frantically to her throbbing brows, she gave utterance to a hollow moan and sank upon the carpet.

CHAPTER CXXXV.

A NIGHT WITH A MURDERED MAN.

THE lamp which stood upon the table immediately began to grow dim as if a mist were perceptibly rising around it: steadily did that dimness increase every moment—until the light was subdued down into the faint glimmer of a distant star—and then it expired altogether, leaving the chamber involved in the blackest darkness.

And upon the floor the milliner was stretched, under the influence of an irresistible rigidity which retained her spell-bound from the hair of her head to the soles of her feet. An appalling consternation was upon her—and yet she could not move a muscle nor give vent to a sound. Her mouth was fast closed as with lockjaw; and the same dreadful species of tetanos held all her limbs in its iron prisonage, leaving to every fibre and tendon the acuteness of feeling and to every sense its peculiar faculty—but suspending all motion, and reducing the woman to the condition of an animated statue.

Yes—but a statue animated with a vitality as fresh and a perception as vivid as if not a single function nor physical power were held in abeyance;—and thus everything which might happen to the miserable being while in this state, was certain to be characterised by a tremendous aggravation of concomitant feeling. Complete and effectual as was the physical restraint, so acute and keen was the moral perception; — and the moment Mrs. Brace became aware that she was reduced to this awful position, she likewise found herself enveloped in a darkness so pitchy that it seemed to be a black mist filling the atmosphere with its stifling density.

All that had passed during the earlier portion of the night she recollected well; and slowly—nay even methodically—did she revolve in her memory the various incidents which had so terribly marked those hours. At length she reached as it were the end of her reflections—that appalling term reminding her that she was now alone in the room with the corpse of the murdered man!

Yes — upon this tremendous truth did her thoughts settle;—and she said within herself, "The dead body lies upon the same carpet where I am stretched. It is only a few feet distant—and if I could stretch out my arm I should touch it with my hand. But heaven forbid that I should seek thus to come in contact with it, even were I able to move a member or a limb. And, O horror! if the corpse itself were to extend its arm——"

The wretched milliner stopped short in her reflections, which had suddenly become too soul-harrowing to permit a continuance;—and over her entire frame, so rigid and statue-like, a glacial shudder passed. But it was not she who moved convulsively *beneath* the influence of this shudder: no—it was the icy tremor which rolled slowly *over* her, with the clammy sensation produced by the contact of a loathsome snake.

Entombed as it were in the midst of that stupendous darkness—stretched helpless, motionless, and voiceless upon the carpet—with all her powers of perception, feeling, and endurance more vividly awake and more acutely susceptible than ever she had known them before—and having upon her mind the astounding conviction that within a few feet of her there was the corpse of the man whom she herself had murdered,—was not such a position enough to deprive the miserable woman of reason and blast her intellect with the searing lightning of madness all in a moment?

But, no—it was not within the range of her destiny that she should experience relief even in the dark mazes of mental aberration: and thus the weight of consternation crushed not at one moment—and the poignancy of anguish rent not reason's powers at another,—although tremendous indeed was the trial to which the strength of the woman's intellect was put by those rapid and torturing alternations.

How long she had lain in that position, she knew not: what hour of the night it was, she could not surmise. Nor was she able to form the least conjecture as to the cause which held her thus spell-bound. She was not circled by cords nor chains: for, if she were, she would feel the bonds upon her person—and moreover she would be at least enabled to move her limbs somewhat. But not a hair's breadth could she stir them—not a hair's breadth could she turn her head either to the right or to the left. And what was more wondrous still—her eyes were wide open, and the lids did not wink!

The tetanos was thus complete: but whence did it arise! Was it from some infernal spell—some diabolical incantation?—or was it the forewarning of the awful visitation of God's wrath upon her? These conjectures were as bewildering as their nature was soul-harrowing;—and every instant was laden with thoughts the anguish of which was sufficient to expand throughout a whole century of existence and fill it with an unceasing woe!

Again and again did the miserable woman reflect that she was alone in that chamber with the corpse of the murdered man;—and again and again did she think within herself that if the same miraculous and incomprehensible power which had reduced her to so helpless a condition of thraldom, should inspire that dead body with the motion, the power, and the will to harm or to terrify her, she must lie still and endure that crowning horror,—for not a finger could she raise in her defence—not a sound could she articulate to summon assistance!

For the fiftieth time these excruciating reflections passed athwart the milliner's imagination, as if a long iron wire armed with a myriad little sharp blades were dragged slowly through her brain, cutting its ferocious way amidst the very quick of the vital mass:—yes—for the fiftieth time had she endured the crucifixion of those lancinating thoughts, when a church-clock proclaimed the hour of three.

Thrice spoke the iron tongue of Time—and the sound carried the cold sensation of the tomb to the heart of the milliner. She knew not why it was—but the announcement of that hour appeared pregnant with awful omen to the mind of that miserable woman. More dread — more solemn—more sepulchral than before was the stillness which succeeded the striking of the clock: it was the profound tranquillity of the grave—the stupendous silence of the tomb!

But, O horror! what sound is that which now reaches the ears of Mrs. Brace and carries an ice-bolt to her heart? It is the rustling of a garment—the slight, faint, and scarcely audible noise produced by a human being slowly turning upon a carpet. And that sound came from within a few feet of the horror-stricken woman—aye, from the very direction in which the corpse lay!

To say that she listened with breathless attention, were to inspire the idea that she had power over her respiration;—whereas, this faculty had remained miraculously suspended from the instant that the tetanos commenced,—her bosom never rising nor sinking once the whole time, but resting stationary and pulseless like the bust of a marble statue. Had not the breath, however, been thus suspended under the influence of the miraculous trance, it would assuredly have become so, and the blood would have turned to ice in the milliner's veins, as that rustling sound stole gradually—gradually—gradually upon her ears.

Conceive that woman chained as it were to the ground by the invisible and impalpable but not less adamantine bonds of a tremendous torpor which locked up the physical powers only, and left the moral perceptions to acquire a more poignant keenness from this total release of their allegiance to the substantial being;—conceive her, we say, thus lying stretched upon her back as powerless and as helpless as if she were made of stone, and yet alive—Oh! God knows how painfully, acutely alive to every circumstance and every influence in any way affecting her;—conceive her in this appalling position, with the harrowing conviction slowly, steadily, and surely stealing into her soul that the corpse of the murdered man was not only moving, but was actually creeping towards her!

Talk of the horrors of churchyards by night—talk of the hideous spectres which throng over the grave of the suicide in the cross-road—talk of the ghastly shapes which crowd around the gibbet to which the bleaching bones of the murderer hang—talk of the overwhelming terrors of the night-mare,—and all these, even when combined together, would fall far short in furnishing an adequate idea of the harrowing nature of those feelings which now took possession of the miserable murderess.

Was it possible that the man had only been in a fit and had come back to life? No: this hypothesis was absurd—for the dose of poison was sufficient to kill a dozen men as powerful and as full of vigorous health as he:—and, moreover, had he not fallen from his chair as if suddenly struck by lightning?—and had not she seen his corpse-like countenance fixed rigidly in death, ere the lamp had been so mysteriously extinguished?

Then—holy God! was it possible that new life had been infused into the dead man?—had the terrible anticipation of the milliner been signally and awfully fulfilled?—and was the corpse endowed with the motion, the power, and the will either to harm or to affright her? Yes—all this was possible—as possible, she felt assured, that she herself could be thus invisibly enchained and thus stretched motionless and powerless on the carpet by some miraculous and superhuman spell!

But while these thoughts were whirling through her brain, the rustling sound—that awful indication of the movement of the dead—was approaching nearer and nearer! Had it been a serpent winding its way towards her, and forcing upon her active imagination all the horrors of its undulating coils and slimy touch,—the effect would not have been half so appalling as was this preternatural, gradient, yet steady and persevering progress of a corpse through the black darkness which filled the chamber.

Fearful as was the consternation which now sate upon the soul of Mrs. Brace, and harrowed as her feelings were, she nevertheless had clearness and vigour of perception sufficient to mark every characteristic, no matter how trivial, of the astounding incident that was now taking place. Thus, her ear becoming accustomed to the rustling sound, she was enabled to form a conjecture of the precise nature of the motion which the body must be undergoing in order to produce that exact noise; and she came to the conclusion that the corpse was being moved—or was moving itself, whichever it might be,—flat along the carpet upon its back.

For five minutes did this awful portion of the supernatural drama last,—five mortal minutes, each appearing to be a century and each to contain the essence of whole ages of excruciating torture! At length the wretched woman became aware that the corpse was close beside her;—and yet not a hair's breadth could she recoil from the coming contact—not the distance of a pin's point could she move a limb away! The natural impulse of an agonising horror was to contract her entire form even within herself, as it were: but this faculty was denied her—so strong, so insuperable was the magic spell thrown upon her by the tetanos.

And now came the awful moment—a moment more fully fraught with undiluted horror than even that when the culprit upon the gallows feels the trap-door slipping away beneath his feet, or when the sailor who has fallen overboard in the southern seas hears the gush of the shark through the water close behind him. Such a moment was it—nay, a more harrowing one still, we affirm—that had now arrived in the existence of Mrs. Brace,—the moment when she felt the first marble-cold touch of the hand of the corpse!

And her own hand was it that thus experienced the initiative contact,—her own right hand which lay by her side as powerless and as completely petrified so far as motion was concerned as all the rest of her body! Slowly—slowly did the corpse pass its cold, cold hand over that of the milliner, who shuddered inwardly, but without contracting her form in any way or to the slightest degree. That shudder was a sensation—and not a movement,—a feeling—and not a real tremor!

From her own hand the hand of the corpse passed slowly up her arm, which was naked to a little above the elbow;—and as the touch of the dead traced its way by very slow degrees over her own plump flesh, she could feel the animal heat in herself gradually retiring beneath the appalling contact which she was thus doomed to experience. Was it not—oh! was it not hell upon earth?—and had not her punishment already begun in this world with a foretaste of the horrors of Satan's Kingdom?

Though she recoiled as it were within herself from this atrocious penance—though she revolted with a rending anguish against so diabolical a torture,—yet did she remain in a condition of utter inability to make any real or effectual movement. Not to a hair's-breadth could she shift her position: a living statue was she!

And now over the upper portion of her dress passed the heavy cold hand of the corpse—and on to her bosom was continued the loathsome, terrible contact. At the same time that the presence of the dead was thus upon the ample, firm, and exuberant contours which had so often heaved in amorous sport and so frequently pillowed the head of some favoured lover,—at the same moment, we say, that the hand of the corpse thus slowly began to wander over the luxuriant globe that palpitated no longer in wanton enjoyment, but was motionless as the breast of the marble statue, —at the same instant was it the horrified woman became aware that the dead body of the murdered man was still drawing itself closer and closer to her side!

And then it really appeared to her as if a scream rose up to the very tip of her tongue, but was stopped by the closed portals formed by her compressed lips;—and thus still did her mortal anguish continue to grow the more excruciating from her utter inability to give expression to it.

From her bosom the hand passed slowly—Ah! and with a revolting touch like that of a slimy serpent—along the neck of the tortured woman, as she thus lay motionless on the floor. Over her chin went the hand—then it passed gradiently upon her left cheek—and all this while the corpse was drawing close up to her right side! At length the hand quitted her countenance—and the arm wound itself by degrees about her neck, the dead body turning itself towards her the while!

And now the corpse raised itself sufficiently to stoop over and place its cold countenance in contact with the cheek of the milliner;—and the arm that circled her neck, appeared to press her lovingly. O heavens! who can describe the hideousness—the revolting loathsomeness—the mortal horror of that unnatural embrace? But, as if the cup of gall, and filth, and abomination should be filled even to the overflowing,—as if there should be nothing required to render this monstrous drama as complete in all its details as possible,—and as if this foretaste of posthumous punishment were to be crowned with all the horrors conceivable by mortal imagination,—the corpse slowly, but surely and resolutely, glued its lips to the mouth of the milliner and sent with its awful caress an ice-chill throughout her whole frame.

The powers of human endurance were now tested to the extreme—the strength of the human intellect was tried to the last degree. A terrible revulsion ensued all in a moment: the limbs of the woman recovered their power of movement—her jaws were unlocked—and with a cry of mingled horror and anguish she started up.

The light of morning was streaming in between the curtains; and as the milliner cast her eyes wildly around her, they encountered the face of Peter Grumley's corpse, lying precisely in the same spot and in the same position as when it had fallen from the chair.

Then Mrs. Brace knew that she had been labouring under the influence of a horrible night-mare—a long dream made up of such frightful incidents that the memory thereof must inevitably follow her to the grave, even should her life extend to the uttermost stretch of human existence!

The truth was that when she had sunk down upon the carpet under the influence of the terror caused by the belief that she beheld the countenance of a corpse at the window, the partial fit which had thus seized upon her yielded to the effects of utter exhaustion of mind and body; and a deep slumber fell upon her eyes. No marvel, then, was it if the dread tragedy of the night haunted her in the dreams which accompanied her sleep;—and the frightful activity of her disordered fancy displayed its power in the appalling vision which we have detailed so minutely.

But though now released from the terrors of that shocking night-mare, Mrs. Brace still found herself in the presence of the tremendous embarrassment which her crime had created. She looked at her watch: it was half-past six o'clock in the morning! The night was gone—and nothing was done to dispose of the corpse. Such was her reflection;—and then came the maddening conviction that she could not possibly make away with it unless by the assistance of one or more of her domestics. But to place herself in *their* power——Ah! better have remained at the mercy of Peter Grumley and have been spared the remorse and the dangers attendant upon the crime of murder!

But what was she to do?—how was she to act? It was useless to repine any more: the past could not be recalled—and it became imperiously necessary to adopt measures for the security of the future. Upon the body she stood gazing for some minutes while these thoughts passed through her mind;—and she no longer experienced any feelings of terror—*for it is not by day-light that murderers are afraid!*

But what was she to do? A hundred times in a minute did she ask herself this question; and no satisfactory answer could she give. At length she reasoned with herself that nothing could now be done for some hours—that she must conceal the corpse as well as she could until the next night—and in the meantime there would be ample leisure to resolve upon the most prudent course to be then adopted.

Having thus succeeded in looking at her position with more calmness and deliberation than she had hitherto been enabled to call to her assistance from the moment the Bow Street Officer fell a corpse at her feet, the milliner resolved to conceal the body in her bath-room adjoining. She however found it no easy task to drag so huge a mass into that place: but at length she accomplished this task; and, locking the door, she felt that she could begin to breathe more freely.

She now hastened to lay aside her garments, which she had worn all night; but when she approached the mirror, she recoiled in horror and dismay at the ghastly countenance that was reflected therein. And yet those features were her own—and it was no spectral face which looked at her through the medium of that glass!

But, great heavens! what an effect had this one night of suffering, terror, guilt, and anguish produced upon the milliner! Her eyes were sunken and hollow—her lips were livid—her face was cadaverous where the rouge lay not upon it—and upon the cheeks that paint added to the ghastliness of her looks.

"This will not do," murmured Mrs. Brace to herself: "my appearance will excite the strangest suspicions! Nothing but my accustomed bath will effectually revive me!"

And to take this bath it was necessary to return into the place whither she had dragged the corpse: but as the beams of morning grew brighter within the rooms, all superstitious terrors evaporated from

the milliner's breast. She accordingly laid aside her apparel—entered the bath-room—threw a cloth over the countenance of the dead body—and indulged in her wonted immersion in cold water.

On issuing from the bath-room, she once more locked the door carefully; and, contemplating herself in the glass, murmured in a tone of mingled triumph and satisfaction, "The night I have passed was terrible—terrible: but it has not left a trace which the world's eye shall observe!"

The milliner then proceeded with her toilette; and in half-an-hour she descended to the apartment where her young ladies were assembled for breakfast.

And no one could possibly have imagined nor would even have believed, if informed of the fact, that within the previous eight hours Mrs. Brace had not only committed a murder but had passed every moment of that period *alone* with the corpse of her victim!

And who that passed by the house that morning and saw all the usual preparations being made for the commercial business of the day,—the shop windows decked out with bonnets of the newest shape, caps of the most coquettish fashion, and lace collars of the most costly species,—and then, glancing into the shop itself, that bevy of charming young women all wearing so modest a demeanour and all attired with such exquisite neatness,—who, we ask, that thus beheld the establishment of Mrs. Brace that morn, could have possibly suspected that there was the corpse of a murdered man in the house?

CHAPTER CXXXVI.

THE BARONET AND THE ROYAL MAIDEN.

We must take a temporary leave of Mrs. Brace, inasmuch as before we can continue the thread of her adventures, there is an episode of interest and importance which must be duly woven into our narrative.

The scene shifts to the environs of Windsor, where Sir Richard Stamford was occupying furnished apartments in a comfortable but secluded dwelling kept by a worthy old couple who never troubled themselves about other people's business. There were no other lodgers in the house; and thus the baronet not only enjoyed the retirement which was so necessary to tranquillise a mind that had passed through so much torturing excitement, but he was likewise free from any of that espionage or impertinent observation which any peculiarity of habits usually entails upon the individual who establishes his quarters in a provincial town.

It was about noon on the day following that fearful night the incidents of which have occupied the preceding chapter; and Sir Richard Stamford was seated in the parlour at his lodging, busily engaged in the perusal of some letters which he had just received from his solicitor at Aylesbury. The contents appeared to give him satisfaction; and it was even with an expression of mingled joy and triumph upon his countenance that he glanced from time to time at the totals presented by two long columns of figures on a balance-sheet that lay spread out before him.

In the midst of this occupation he was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door of his apartment; and having desired the individual to enter, he sprang from his seat with an ejaculation of mingled delight and astonishment on beholding the Princess Amelia!

Her Royal Highness was attired with an elegant simplicity which became her style of beauty far more advantageously than the richest apparel gemmed with precious stones. The modest gipsy-hat enhanced the air of winning softness and sweet amiability which characterised her countenance; and the rich contours of her full, voluptuous form were developed rather than concealed by the plain dress which fitted closely to her fine luxuriant shape.

The smile that wreathed her lips parted them so as to display the teeth of dazzling whiteness;—and her cheeks wore the healthy glow of virginal freshness that had deepened with the rapid walk which the royal lady had taken through the park.

"Beautiful Princess!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, throwing himself upon his knees before her and pressing to his lips the hand which she extended towards him; "how can I sufficiently testify my gratitude for this honour—this unexpected pleasure——"

"If you mean to regard my visit as an honour, Sir Richard," said the Princess, "you will at once invest it with a cold formality which will destroy all the meaning and significance which I had wished to impart to it. In a word, it was as a friend that I came to see you——"

"And as my good genius—my guardian angel, do I welcome you!" cried the baronet, again pressing Amelia's hand to his lips: then, rising from his knees and gently conducting her to a seat, he placed himself by her side, saying, "This is the happiest moment I have known for a long, long time—and far happier than I had ever hoped to experience again."

"Now you speak in a manner which gives me pleasure," said the Princess: but, feeling that a blush was rapidly overspreading her countenance, she hastened to observe, "We have pledged a lasting and indestructible friendship to each other—and it was this sentiment which prompted me to take a step that under other circumstances would be improper and inconsistent to a degree. Tell me, therefore, that you do not think less of me for having intruded myself upon your privacy: tell me that I have not suffered in your estimation!"

"Oh! my dearest friend—for such you have permitted me to call you, and such you have indeed proved yourself," exclaimed the baronet, surveying the Princess with a species of holy adoration in which there was naught gross nor sensual,—"how is it possible that you can ask me if I be offended by this crowning proof of your kindness towards me? When we have walked together for hours in the park and the wind has been too cold for you to sit down to rest yourself, I should have besought you to bless my humble dwelling with your presence if only for a few minutes: but I was fearful of giving offence. And yet I have felt at the time how happy I should be if you were to cross the threshold of this apartment where I pass so many hours alone——thinking of you," he added, in a tone of deep and fervid emotion.

"Then I am glad that I have on this occasion obeyed the sudden fancy that took possession of me as I was traversing the park," said the Princess Amelia, her own voice sounding tremulously as if it were laden with ineffable feeling. "For I came forth to walk at an earlier hour than usual this morning,"

she continued; "and knowing that you would not think of coming to meet me until half-past twelve, I resolved to surprise you by this visit—which perhaps speaks more eloquently on behalf of my friendship than of my discretion," she observed, in a tone of embarrassment and with a blush again deepening the vermeil glow upon her damask cheeks.

"My angelic friend," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, now taking her hand of his own accord, "do not mar by any regret or compunction on your part the pleasure which this visit causes me to experience. Hitherto, amiable Princess, you have performed towards me the part of the good Samaritan. You have poured the oil and wine of sympathy and consolation into the wounds of my spirit: you have rescued me from the doom of misanthropy and the fate of cynicism;—and, guiding me gently out of the bleak and desolate wilderness of my own dark thoughts, you have tutored me to contemplate the roses of hope which yet bloom in this world even for one who has endured so much as I. Had it not been for you, excellent Princess, I should have resigned myself to despair ——or perhaps have flown to that more terrible alternative to which the desperate have recourse, but of which I now shudder even to think. Oh! how deep, then, is the debt of gratitude which I owe to you, generous-hearted lady;—and how immensely have you augmented that obligation by the frank, ingenuous, and friendly manner in which you have now visited me. Henceforth this room will appear to me under another and far more cheerful aspect; and when seated alone herein, contemplating your image, I shall retain the delightful remembrance that you yourself have lightened the darkness of my abode!"

"You are addressing me with an enthusiasm which carries an ineffable pleasure into my soul," said the Princess Amelia: "for I perceive that I have been the means of restoring you at least to some degree of happiness."

"Dear lady, when I am in your presence," returned the baronet, gazing with admiration upon her, "the past—frightful as it is—appears only as a dream, or as something which is so far off as scarcely to leave a black shade in the memory."

"And when I am not with you, the gloomy cloud comes back to sit upon your soul and brood the darkest thoughts?" said the Princess, her voice assuming a tenderness which stole like elysian music upon the senses of the baronet and carried a soft ecstacy of feeling in unto the very depths of his soul.

"Alas! when I am alone," he observed, after a pause of nearly a minute and now heaving a profound sigh, "I have only your image to solace me! But then I ponder upon every word that has fallen from your lips during the hours we have been together—and I repeat a thousand times to myself the solacing assurance which you always give me at parting, that we shall meet again on the morrow. And we *do* meet thus day after day—and my existence appears to have undergone so complete a change and have entered upon a phase so thoroughly new that there are moments when I cease even to regret the prosperity of earlier years."

"And in order to keep you in this happy frame of mind," said the royal maiden, lowering her voice to a whisper that was only just audible, as she bent down her head to conceal her blushes,—"and likewise to prevent the return of the gloomy mood, I should never leave you."

"Great heaven! what words are these which you have uttered?" ejaculated the baronet, starting in mingled amazement and alarm at the sudden intuition which sprang up in his mind—or rather at the light which was thrown all in a moment upon the state of his own feelings.

"Wherefore this excitement?" asked the Princess, gazing upon him anxiously.

"Because you have just made an observation, dear lady," responded the baronet, "which has opened my mental eyes to a truth unsuspected until now, and the sudden revelation of which to my senses produced mingled feelings of surprise and terror."

"And that truth—what is it?" demanded the Princess Amelia, trembling all over and still contemplating the baronet with those lovely azure eyes which appeared to swim in a delicious languor.

"I dare not answer your question," replied Sir Richard, now evincing much embarrassment and confusion.

"If there be secrets between us, Richard," murmured the royal maiden, "what becomes of the friendship which we have pledged each other?"

"Oh! what am I to say?—what am I to do?" exclaimed the baronet, his whole frame quivering with emotions of an indescribable ecstacy as he pressed the hand of the Princess in his own and gazed intently on her beauteous, blushing countenance; for this was the first time she had ever ventured to call him by his Christian name alone — and the circumstance amounted almost to an avowal on her part, or at least to an encouragement of such an avowal from his lips.

"What are you to say?" repeated the Princess, who herself felt as if she were bathing in a fount of bliss and as if the gates of paradise were slowly unfolding to her contemplation all the joys within. "What are you to say, do you ask?" she murmured again: "Oh! answer me frankly and candidly—and tell me the nature of that truth which has so suddenly become apparent to your comprehension?"

"But I may offend you, dear Princess—I may risk your friendship—that friendship which I value more than life!" exclaimed the baronet, bewildered how to act.

"No feeling which you are capable of harbouring can possibly offend me, Richard," said Amelia, her tone expressing the soft sensuousness which was diffused throughout her entire frame and was expressed in the deepening hue of the swimming eyes and the glowing tint which spread its carnation richness over her cheeks.

"Then you command me to speak candidly, dear Princess?" said the baronet.

"No—I do not command," she responded, with an accent of gentle reproach: "I beseech—I implore."

"Then hear the truth, adorable Amelia," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, throwing himself again upon his knees at her feet: and gazing up into her blushing, burning face with looks full of ineffable devotion, he said in a voice of fervent passion, "I love you, Amelia — my God! I love you with all the power of a grateful soul and an adoring heart!"

"You love me—you love me?" murmured the Princess, now enjoying the happiest moment of her life; and casting her arms around the neck of

the handsome man who knelt at her feet, she gave back with ardour the warm kisses which he imprinted upon her lips, her cheeks, and her brow.

"Love you!—yes—oh! yes—such sympathy as I have received from you, sweet lady, could not fail to engender love," responded Sir Richard Stamford.

"Thank God! he loves me—he loves me!" still murmured the Princess Amelia, appearing to pour her whole soul—her life—her being, into the ecstacy produced by the avowal of affection which she had received from the lips of the baronet.

"And is it possible that you can love me in return?" he asked, rising slowly from his knees and resuming his place by her side, although without disengaging himself from the warm embrace in which she held him.

"It is possible—it is true—it is God's own truth that I love you—that I would lay down my life to serve you!" exclaimed the royal maiden, with impassioned vehemence; and she continued to lavish her caresses with the fondest ardour upon the baronet.

"Your friendship, Amelia, was a boon which could not be too dearly prized," he said, returning the kisses which she thus bestowed upon him: "but your love—oh! *that* is a happiness so totally unexpected—so unlooked for——"

"Ah! is it possible that you could have mistaken the feeling with which I regarded you, Richard?" inquired the Princess, in a tone of tender reproach. "Did you not perceive that I loved you?"

"I dared not trust my thoughts upon the subject," replied the baronet. "But the nature of my own feelings was not understood by me until those words which you uttered just now struck as it were upon the concealed chord of tenderness and vibrated to my very heart's core. Thence the inspiration was carried to the brain—and I perceived in a moment that I loved you!"

"Oh! what happiness is it to love and be beloved!" murmured the Princess, suffering her bonnet to fall off and reclining her head upon the baronet's shoulder: then, closing her eyes for nearly a minute as if to shut out all external objects and thus render the revel of her own thoughts all the more luxuriously complete, she said, "And have I indeed taught your heart to love once more, Richard?—and do you really comprehend the nature of your own sentiments? Because it would break my heart were you to tell me, to-morrow—or in a week—or in a month—or even in a year, that you were mistaken — that you were carried away by the enthusiasm of a moment——"

"Oh! do not mistrust the nature of that passion which I experience for you," interrupted the baronet, looking down into the depths of those beauteous azure eyes which the royal maiden now opened again, and which gave back a living flood of fondness in return for his own adoring gaze: "do not suspect the truth nor doubt the sincerity of that sentiment which has become a worship—a faith—a creed--an enthusiastic devotion in my soul! Nor marvel, beauteous Amelia, that a being lately so lorn, desolate, and woe-begone as I, can have thus learnt to love so soon and so tenderly again. For all that has happened is natural and easily to be explained;—and I were indeed something less or something more than man had I not yielded to the elysian influence wherewith I was surrounded. Not a month has elapsed since you found me the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth. Every hope which could possibly bind me to existence, was dead—crucified by the faithlessness of a woman and the treachery of friends! And thus had my bosom become the burial-place of life's brightest promises—the grave of every aspiration which this world's sun had gilded. My heart was a tomb wherein reposed the memories of blighted affections, ruined hopes, and false friendships: and at the entrance of that sepulchral heart had the demon of despair placed a stone to bar admission against all tender sympathies. But you came, Amelia: you rolled away that stone—— and you sate in my heart as an angel, proclaiming the resurrection of hope!"

"Oh! it is delightful to hear you thus account for that love which fills your soul, and which I no longer mistrust nor doubt," cried the Princess, flinging herself upon the baronet's breast and appearing to grow there. "And I thank God," she continued in a tone of exalted fervour, "that I have been the instrument of thus re-awakening you to a sense of earth's bliss and the world's enjoyment."

"This world has suddenly become a paradise to my view," responded Sir Richard Stamford. "And yet—even now in the midst of this felicity which is so transcendent as to appear a dream,—even now, I say, does a sudden cause of alarm spring up——"

"Alarm!" echoed the Princess, withdrawing herself partially from his embrace and surveying him with mingled apprehension and surprise.

"Oh! the alarm to which I allude, springs from the love which I bear you," hastily exclaimed the baronet; "and it is indeed a natural consequence of that passion."

"I do not understand you yet, Richard," said the royal maiden. "In mercy explain yourself—and keep me not in suspense."

"I mean, dearest Amelia," resumed the baronet, contemplating her with ineffable fondness, "that the love which I experience is not centred in a common object—but in a lady of the most exalted rank,—a lady to whose hand I dare not aspire, and with whom no clandestine marriage would be legal——"

"The love which I bear for you has no consideration of rites, ceremonies, or forms," interrupted the Princess Amelia, with a decision which belonged to her character, but which the strength of her passion now mainly inspired. "It is a love," she continued, looking steadily upon his countenance, "which can recognise no human laws—no conventional statutes,—a love acknowledging only the heart's tenderest and holiest ties—the soul's most sacred and solemn bonds. If this be the love that you can accept and that will make you happy—if this be the passion that you can reciprocate as tenderly and as devotedly——"

"Oh! can you doubt it, my best beloved—my charming Amelia?" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, catching her in his arms and straining her to his breast. "This is indeed a day of happiness for me! I awoke with a presentiment that many occurrences of a smiling character were to take place ere night should come again. And I have not been disappointed! Behold those letters," he continued, pointing towards the papers lying upon the table: "they are from my solicitor at Aylesbury, and they arrived this morning. Their contents are far more cheering than even my most sanguine hopes could have led me to believe. All my property has been sold and realised: the Earl of Desborough has become the purchaser of the Manor at a large price—and not only has every creditor of the late bank been paid in full, but a handsome income remains for me. That balance-sheet, dearest Amelia, enables me to hold up my head again and look the world in the face."

"Oh! sincerely — most sincerely do I congratulate you, my beloved Richard," exclaimed the Princess. "Heaven knows you have suffered enough—and it is time that the wheel of fortune should turn."

"It *has* turned—and a new phase is presented to my view," observed the baronet. "Oh! how can I be otherwise than thoroughly happy—at least as happy as a man may be who has endured so much as I. My character is fully cleared up—my liabilities are settled—the world once more calls me an honourable man—and then comes your love, my angel Amelia, to bless me with its heavenly influence! And that love—oh! I accept it as you have offered—I accept it as the pure incense of your affectionate heart—and I will remain worthy of it until death shall separate us."

"And on my side," said the Princess, "I vow most solemnly and I call heaven to attest the oath, that I will remain single for your sake——"

"Oh! pledge not yourself thus rashly!" interrupted the baronet with vehemence.

"Nay—hinder me not," said the royal maiden, with a tone and manner of indomitable decision, while her beauteous countenance became lighted up by a kindred glow of enthusiasm: "hinder me not, I say—nor fear that I shall ever repeat of the words I am about to utter. But hear me patiently and attentively while I invoke heaven to attest my vow that I will remain unmarried, Richard, for thy sake—that I will reject every negotiation which

may be made by others for the disposal of my hand—and that I will live and die thy wife in the sight of heaven, if not in the eyes of the world!"

"The tongue of man has no language to express an adequate amount of gratitude for so much disinterested love," said Sir Richard Stamford, sinking upon one knee and pressing the fair hand of the Princess between both his own. "Your vow is recorded—solemnly recorded, Amelia,—and I do not ask you to withdraw it. Your love is therefore pledged to me—and in return I pledge thee mine! Yes—dearest and most beauteous of women, accept the tenderest affection united with the most fervent gratitude of my heart; and believe that I will perish sooner than cause thee pain either by word or deed."

"And these vows which we have exchanged are irrevocable!" said the Princess Amelia, in a solemn tone, as she forced her lover to rise from his kneeling posture: then, throwing herself into his arms, she said, "Richard, I am thy wife—thy wife in the sight of heaven—and thou art my husband!"

CHAPTER CXXXVII.

THE EXCITEMENT AND TERRORS OF GUILT.

WE must now return to Mrs. Brace and take up the thread of her adventures which we were compelled to relinquish for a moment.

Although she continued to wear a smiling face in the presence of her young ladies,—and although, when customers came, she assumed an exterior which was admirably calculated to produce the impression that no woman in the universe enjoyed a mental tranquillity more complete than her own,—yet throughout the live-long day did she in reality endure the tortures of the damned.

Again must we observe that this poignancy of feeling arose not so much from remorse as from alarm, vexation, and despair at the perilous position in which she had placed herself. For every minute recurred the question—What was she to do with the body?—and the oftener she put this interrogatory to herself, the more bewildered did she become.

Then, the necessity of maintaining a pleasant exterior was a task very far from being unaccompanied with difficulty; and she felt that it was hard indeed—nay, fraught with a mental agony the most acute—to wreathe her lips into smiles while a vulture was gnawing at her heart.

In the course of the forenoon, Harriet applied to her for the key of the bath-chamber that the housemaid might perform her usual duties there; and Mrs. Brace was compelled to invent some excuse the triviality of which made her blush up to the very hair of her head as she uttered it—and then the colour disappeared as rapidly with the mortal terror that struck to her heart. But Harriet noticed not that the apology was ridiculous or that there was anything peculiar in the manner of her mistress; it was conscience which thus rendered the wretched woman a coward and made her not only suspect her own actions but likewise the construction which might be put upon them.

In the afternoon an ill-looking fellow called at the fashionable establishment in Pall Mall and insisted upon seeing Mrs. Brace alone. He would not state his business—nor yet send in his name; and when this doggedness of conduct on his part was communicated by a domestic to the milliner, she was struck by a mortal chill as if Death had suddenly seized upon her. For the first tremendous thought which the message excited in her mind, was that her crime had been some how or another suspected and that an officer of justice was coming to search the house. But at the next moment she discarded the idea as one which her terrors could alone have generated; and regaining her presence of mind by an almost preterhuman effort, she commanded the domestic to admit the persevering visitor into her presence.

The moment the fellow was shown to the parlour where she waited to receive him, she recognised a man whom she had seen in Grumley's company at Bow Street; and once more was she nearly annihilated by the tremendous terror which fell upon her like a dead weight. Sinking back into the chair whence she had risen, she demanded the man's business in a voice which despair alone endowed with any degree of firmness.

Her emotion was not likely to escape the keen glance of so watchful an individual as Mobbs—for he the visitor was: but as there happened to be wine-decanters upon the table, it instantaneously struck the officer that Mrs. Brace had been indulging somewhat too freely—in plain terms, that she was drunk. He accordingly said within himself, "Grumley was right—she *is* a wery fine woman: but it's a pity she drinks so precious hard!"

Then, having hastily made this reflection to himself, Mr. Mobbs proceeded to observe that he was a Bow Street Officer, and that this was the reason he did not choose to send in his name or profession—as he thought that Mrs. Brace would prefer granting him a personal interview rather than exchange messages through the medium of the servant.

The extreme civility which Mobbs contrived to throw into his manner, and the language in which he embodied the above very natural explanation not only reassured Mrs. Brace, but likewise allowed her the leisure necessary to recover her self-possession; and, shocked at the idea that she had exhibited emotions which must be either incomprehensible to the man or upon which he must have put the strangest construction, she hastened to observe that she was suffering under a very severe indisposition of which a bewildering head-ache constituted a part. She then once more demanded the business which had brought Mobbs thither; and the man proceeded to explain himself in the following manner:—

"The fact is, ma'am, last night me and my master, Mr. Peter Grumley, the head officer of Bow Street, separated at your door—me going one way, and Mr. Grumley remaining behind to pay his respects to you. But he hasn't made his appearance this morning at the Office or yet been heerd of at his lodgings; and therefore I thought as how you might have sent him off somewhere on partickler business."

"It is perfectly true that your comrade called upon me last night," said Mrs. Brace, who had now altogether recovered her presence of mind: "but he did not remain with me above ten minutes or a quarter of an hour—and then he took his departure."

"Well, this is wery strange," said Mobbs, evidently much perplexed: then, after a few moments' deep thought, he observed inquiringly, "P'raps it wouldn't be too bold, ma'am, if I was to ask whether you paid him any money?"

"Yes—five hundred guineas, according to agreement," was the prompt answer. "I know that I may trust you as confidently as if it were Mr. Grumley himself," she added, with a smile.

"To be sure you may, ma'am," observed Mobbs: then recurring to the topic which was uppermost in his mind, he said in a musing tone, "I should scarcely think that Grumley has gone and got into dangerous company with all that swag about his person. He's rayther too knowing for that sort of thing; and as for his being attacked, robbed, and murdered in the open streets—*that* isn't likely."

"Depend upon it, your friend will make his appearance in the course of the day," said Mrs. Brace. "Perhaps he has taken a little drop too much in the company of some jovial revellers and is sleeping away his head-ache."

"No, ma'am—that isn't like Peter Grumley," said Mobbs, shaking his head ominously. "If he isn't murdered, then he's bolted—that's all!" ejaculated the man, a sudden idea striking him. "And now that I think well upon the subject, I dessay he *has* cut and run not on'y through fear of the consekvences of letting that young gal escape last night, but also to cheat me out of my reglars in respect to the five hundred guineas which he received from you."

"I should not at all wonder if you have hit upon the real truth at last," observed Mrs. Brace, scarcely able to restrain her joy at the false scent upon which the official understrapper had got. "Indeed, Mr. Grumley hinted to me last night that he was afraid it would prove the dearest five hundred guineas he ever fingered in all his life."

"Ah! if he said *that*, ma'am," exclaimed Mobbs, "there isn't no longer any doubt upon the subjeck. He's bolted, clear enough—and I'm left behind to bear the brunt."

"Well, as you were his associate in a matter which more or less interested myself," said Mrs. Brace, "I cannot suffer you to go altogether unrewarded; and I therefore beg your acceptance of these fifty guineas."

The eyes of Mobbs sparkled with delight as the milliner counted down the gold upon the table; and as he took up the shining pieces and weighed them in his rough horny hand, he expressed his thanks over and over again.

"Of course," said Mrs. Brace, as he was about to quit the room, "my name will not be mentioned under any circumstances, no matter what may transpire."

"Trust me for that, ma'am," rejoined Mobbs;—and he then took his departure.

Mrs. Brace now breathed far more freely than she had done for many hours; and thus the visit of Mobbs, which had at first assumed so ominous an aspect and struck such terror into her soul, proved the source of an incalculable relief to her apprehensions. She saw that Grumley's disappearance would everywhere receive the natural interpretation of a flight to avoid the consequences of letting a prisoner escape; and this conviction inspired her with a sense of security which nerved her to look calmly and deliberately at the embarrassment wherein she was placed with regard to the dead body.

The deeper she pondered upon the matter, the more imperiously necessary did it seem to admit some one to her confidence; and she finally resolved as the night approached, to entrust the tremendous secret to Harriet, her faithful abigail. But she postponed the evil moment as long as possible; and it was not until the young ladies had retired to rest and the clock was striking eleven, that the milliner, who was now seated alone in her parlour, could muster up courage sufficient to enter upon the appalling topic.

At length, feeling that an excitement was growing upon her which would speedily destroy all her resolution and throw her ideas into chaotic disorder, she rang the bell; and when Harriet made her appearance, she bade the young woman follow her up stairs to her own chamber.

Upon gaining this room, the milliner placed the candle upon the toilette-table and locked the door: then suddenly fixing her eyes, which had in a moment become wild and haggard, upon the lady's-maid, she said, in a deep voice, "Harriet, I am about to reveal to you a terrible secret!"

"Ah! madam, is it possible that you are on the point of giving birth to a child?" said the dependant, her knowledge of her mistress's frailty instantly exciting this idea in her mind.

"Would to God that it were no worse, Harriet!" returned Mrs. Brace, speaking in a hollow whisper. "But I implore you to steady your mind in order to receive as calmly as possible a revelation that is only too well calculated to fill you with horror."

"Merciful heavens! ma'am—what do you mean?" exclaimed Harriet, now catching the infection of the milliner's harrowed feelings.

"I mean," responded her mistress, in a still lower, deeper, and more hollow tone, while her looks expressed all the mingled anguish and terror that had become resuscitated in her soul,—"I mean, Harriet, that there is a dead body in yon bath-room——"

"O horror!" ejaculated the young woman with a stifling shriek—and staggering backward, she threw her eyes in unspeakable terror towards the door of the adjacent chamber.

"Silence—and courage—I conjure you!" said Mrs. Brace, clasping her hands in agonising entreaty. "If you alarm the house you will ruin me: but if you will assist me, I will load you with favours and benefits!"

"Speak, madam—what can I do?" demanded the lady's-maid, struggling as well as she was able against the horrified feelings that had seized upon her.

"Listen to me for a few moments, my dear Harriet," said the milliner, speaking with all the rapidity of a hysterical excitement. "You remember that the Bow Street Officer called last evening? Well—he became intoxicated—he pressed me with his licentious proposals—I was compelled to submit——My God! what could I do?——I conducted him hither—and all in a moment he fell down dead at my feet—stricken by the lightning-stroke of apoplexy!"

"Dead—at your feet!" echoed Harriet, shuddering convulsively and repeating the milliner's words with the mechanical impulse of dire horror.

"Yes—in an instant was I plunged into this cruel embarrassment," said Mrs. Brace: "and all last

night I remained here—alone with the corpse! Now you are acquainted with this terrible secret, Harriet——"

"Oh! I wish that I had never known it, ma'am!" exclaimed the young woman, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out some hideous object from her view.

"Ah! now you drive me to despair, Harriet!" moaned the wretched milliner. "My God! what is to be done!"

"I know not!" responded the abigail, dropping her hands suddenly, but only to wring them frantically. "It already seems to me as if a murder had been committed and that I was an accessory!"

"A murder!" repeated Mrs. Brace in a hollow tone and with a convulsive start: then, fixing her haggard eyes upon her dependant, she said, "You do not suppose, Harriet—you cannot think that I—I—caused the death of that man?"

"I am afraid to think, ma'am—I recoil from my own thoughts," returned Harriet, her tone and manner both acquiring firmness from actual despair: then, as if suddenly conqering repugnances until this moment invincible, and summoning all her resolution to her aid, the young woman exclaimed, "But there is no time to lose—and we must meet this embarrassment face to face!"

"Oh! thank you, thank you, Harriet—dear Harriet, for this change in your conduct towards me!" said the unhappy Mrs. Brace. "Tell me what we ought to do—I will place myself entirely in your hands—and your reward shall exceed all your expectations."

"It is impossible that you and I can dispose of the body alone," resumed Harriet, her courage and presence of mind appearing to gain strength in proportion as the feelings of her mistress underwent a painful reaction. "We must make a confidant of one of the men-servants," she added emphatically.

"O Harriet!" murmured Mrs. Brace, shocked at the thought of falling so completely into the power of her domestics: but the next moment an idea struck her—and she exclaimed, "If I mistake not, there is a tolerable good understanding between you and Frederick?"

"We keep company together, ma'am," observed Harriet: for the individual to whom Mrs. Brace had alluded, was one of the footmen belonging to that part of her establishment which looked upon St. James's Square.

"Listen, then, my dear girl," continued the milliner, who now rapidly recovered her own self-possession, inasmuch as she saw a means whereby the co-operation and silence of her lady's-maid and her footman could be alike secured. "About the person of the dead man there is no less than a sum of five hundred and fifty guineas, all of which he received from me."

For the reader will remember that in addition to the amount paid by the milliner for the services rendered by Grumley in the affair of Caroline Walters, fifty guineas had likewise been demanded by the constable as one of the conditions on which he liberated the Gallows' Widow from his custody.

"And that sum of which you speak, ma'am?" said Harriet, in a tone of inquiring eagerness, as her eyes sparkled with cupidity.

"Every farthing shall be yours as a wedding-dowry," replied Mrs. Brace; "and I will give Frederick a hundred guineas into the bargain. Do you not think he will be happy to marry you upon these terms?"

"Leave it to me to manage!" exclaimed the lady's-maid, her handsome countenance lighting up with exultation. "This very night shall the dead body be disposed of in such a way—— But time wears on," she cried, hastily interrupting herself, and glancing with a certain degree of reviving uneasiness at the bath-room door. "I will go at once and fetch Frederick to help us."

"But you will hurry back as soon as you can?—you will not keep me waiting here—*alone?*" said the milliner, shuddering at the reminiscences which swept through her mind and which made her soul recoil in horror from the mere thought of the diabolical dream that had characterised the preceding night.

"In five minutes I will return with Frederick, ma'am," said the lady's-maid;—and she hastened from the room.

But the instant Mrs. Brace thus found herself once more alone in the close vicinage of the corpse of her victim, a dreadful oppression came over her—the atmosphere of the chamber seemed hot as if laden with the steam of human blood—a strange humming sound stole upon her ears, as if the low voices of invisible spectres were repeating the tale of midnight murder—and ghastly countenances suddenly appeared to be looking forth upon her from the obscurity which enveloped the extremities of the apartment and from every nook where the furniture threw a sombre shadow.

For upwards of a minute did she remain standing in the middle of the room, struggling against the awful feeling of uneasiness which was thus gaining upon her; but so intolerable did it become that she opened the door leading into the passage and listened in anxious expectation of hearing the returning footsteps of Harriet accompanied by her lover. But all was still—all was silent as the grave; and then Mrs. Brace feared that some one was standing behind her! Re-entering the room, she approached the cupboard and poured herself out a glass of brandy:—but the creaking of the closet door on its hinges caused her to give so sudden a start that she spilt a portion of the liquor while conveying it to her lips. Nevertheless, she imbibed sufficient to animate her with that bastard courage which constitutes an armour wherewith to gird the guilty soul; and she repeated the dram in order to enhance that unnatural flow of spirits which was so suddenly excited within her. Yes: the burning alcohol had become her brazen corslet—her helm—and her shield, to defend her against the spectres of terror and the demons of remorse:—the fiery spirit which she had so copiously poured down her throat, became her armour of proof;—and she staggered beneath the weight of her panoply!

Then, experiencing a sensation of stifling heat, the milliner proceeded to take off her gown and unlace her stays; and assuming a loose wrapper, she even smiled at herself complacently in the mirror as she negligently fastened the flowing garment around her luxuriant and voluptuous shape.

But this sentiment of self-complacency, which was only the feverish fume of the alcohol, speedily yielded to a feeling of anxiety, and she wondered what could possibly detain Harriet so long!

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CHAPTER CXXXVIII.

THE DISPOSAL OF THE CORPSE.

In the meantime Harriet had proceeded with light, quick, and noiseless step to the chamber of Frederick Dray, the junior of the two footmen in the employ of Mrs. Brace.

He was a young and handsome man—tall and well-formed—possessing good hair, eyes, and teeth—and entertaining by no means a bad opinion of his own qualifications, both personal and intellectual. Selfish and profligate, extravagant and unprincipled, treacherous and hypocritical, Frederick Dray was in reality a most dangerous character, although the worst features of his disposition had as yet received no opportunity of manifesting themselves in the household of Mrs. Brace. Thus, although Harriet was upon the utmost terms of intimacy with this individual, she was far from suspecting how thoroughly heartless he was, and how capable of any turpitude in order to enhance his own interests or further his own views!

On the particular night in question, he had not long ascended to his own chamber when a slight tap at the door announced the presence of the lady's-maid, who has already been described in the early part of our narrative as a fine handsome young woman, about twenty years of age.

Frederick, who had not begun to undress, was by no means astonished at this visit; and therefore the reader may rest assured that it was not the first time he had thus been favoured with the presence of Harriet in his bed-room at an hour when modesty would have blushed at the proceeding.

"Well, my dear girl," he said, in a tone half kind and half superciliously conceited, "you cannot do without me—eh? Must come to your Frederick's arms?—couldn't live a week away from him?"

"You know that I love you, Fred," she observed, going up to him as he sate upon his bed, and throwing her arm round his neck.

"Well, I am not astonished that you should like me a little," he exclaimed: "for I am not the ugliest fellow in the world—nor yet the greatest fool. But what is the matter with you, Harriet?" he demanded, observing that there was something singular, or at all events unusual, in the young woman's looks and manner.

"Frederick," she said, not exactly replying to his question, "you are aware that I shall not be able to conceal my position much longer. Will you not fulfil your promise—and—and marry me, without farther delay?"

"It is all very easy, my girl, to talk of marriage," responded the conceited footman; "but where the devil is the money to come from? 'Tis true that I get good wages and pick up many perquisites and presents in this house: but I don't know how the deuce it is, the money does run away so fast——"

"Because you are so very, very extravagant, Fred," interrupted Harriet. "However, I do not mean to reproach you," she added, assuming her most coaxing and endearing manner: "for I am very fond of you—and I know that if you had the means, you would fulfil your promise and marry me."

"Well, I don't know but what I might," said the young man: "that is to say," he added, with a look of extreme animal grossness, "if I was sure that the child which you are soon to bring forth, is really my own."

"I take God to witness my oath that it is!" ejaculated Harriet, her countenance flushing with excitement.

"Come, you needn't put yourself into a rage, my dear," said her paramour, with the most haughty indifference: "for you are very well aware that I was not the first—nor the second——"

"But you know that I have remained faithful to you, Fred, from the moment that you began to pay your addresses to me," interrupted Harriet, the tears starting into her eyes; "and it is not generous to reproach me for the past—particularly as I never attempted to deceive you on that score. I admitted that Lord Montgomery had seduced me in the first instance, and that Lord Florimel had afterwards been intimate with me: but none other save yourself——"

"Well, well—we won't quarrel about it, Harriet," exclaimed the footman. "Come—begin to undress——"

"Oh! but you have not yet answered my question," interrupted the young woman, impatiently. "I wish to know whether you would marry me, if we had enough money to set us up in housekeeping?"

"You really begin to make me suspect that you have either picked up a purse or found a treasure in some nook," said the man-servant: "or else one of your former lovers has promised to give you a dowry. Come—which is it?"

"And suppose it really was something of the sort?" exclaimed Harriet, with an arch smile which displayed her fine teeth and made her large blue eyes look roguish as well as naturally wanton.

"The truth is, my dear girl," responded the self-sufficient footman, caressing his whiskers,—"and I may as well relieve you of all suspense at once,—I have vowed within myself that I will never bestow my hand upon any young woman who cannot show me a dowry of five hundred guineas. So now there can be no misunderstanding between us."

"Not at all!" ejaculated the lady's-maid, overjoyed at the manner in which the conversation was now progressing. "To come to the point at once, then, I can put you in the way of obtaining five hundred and fifty guineas this very night—and if you keep your promise and marry me, Mrs. Brace will give you a hundred more."

"Mrs. Brace! What has she got to do with the matter?" demanded Frederick Dray, turning an incredulous look upon his handsome mistress.

"Oh! I will explain everything in a moment," she replied: "but give me the promise——"

"Well—I swear to marry you upon those conditions," exclaimed the footman. "Indeed, I shall be most happy to do so, and shan't consider that I'm flinging myself away. But what is required of me in order to earn the five hundred and fifty guineas?—and what the devil has our mis'sus to do with the affair?"

"Listen—and don't start with astonishment, because you'll frighten me—nor yet cry out, because you'll alarm the house. But the truth is," continued the abigail, her tone suddenly becoming serious and her manner solemn, "a man has died of apoplexy in Mrs. Brace's bed-room—and the corpse must be disposed of this very night!"

"No!—is this possible, Harriet?" were the ejacu-

lations which burst from the lips of the astounded Frederick Dray: but instantly perceiving how tremendous was the hold which the knowledge of such a secret gave him over Mrs. Brace, he hastened to observe, "My dear Harriet, I am ready to devote myself body and soul for our poor mis'sus—— who promises five hundred and fifty guineas——"

"We must not waste time in chattering here, Fred," exclaimed the abigail: "indeed, I have already been more than a quarter of an hour absent —and I promised to return in five minutes. So follow me in silence!"

The footman started with alacrity to his feet; and Harriet led the way cautiously back to Mrs. Brace's bed-chamber, into which she introduced her companion, closing the door with the utmost care.

The milliner who had grown nervously impatient despite of the exhilarating influence of the brandy, was much pleased when she beheld the re-appearance of her faithful abigail in company with the footman. Harriet, who knew her mistress well, immediately perceived that she had been seeking artificial courage in the bottle; but Frederick Dray was not a little astonished to observe that the milliner wore so cheerful a countenance under such horrifying and embarrassing circumstances.

However, there was little leisure for making observations with the eyes and none for expressing irrelevant ones with the lips: for Harriet hastened to inform her mistress that she had acquainted Frederick with what had happened, and that he was willing and ready to lend all the assistance in his power. Mrs. Brace thereupon opened the door of the bath-room, and taking the light in her hand, entered that place where the corpse of Peter Grumley was lying.

A cold tremor passed over Harriet's frame, and she averted her eyes shudderingly as Frederick Dray calmly and deliberately proceeded to remove the cloth which the milliner had thrown over the face of the dead body.

"Why—it's the Bow Street Officer, I declare!" exclaimed the footman, after surveying the livid countenance of the murdered man: and he turned his eyes with an expression of mingled amazement and incredulity upon Mrs. Brace, his looks and manner both implying a suspicion that there was something more in this affair than had been communicated to him.

"Come—we have no time to lose," said Mrs. Brace, with a full recurrence of all that nervous trepidation which she had chased away by means of the brandy. "The money I have promised you is in the man's pockets—you can secure it at once," she hastened to observe; for she did not altogether like the looks which Frederick Dray had thrown upon her, and her guilty conscience naturally suggested the idea that he had penetrated the secret of the murder.

"Here is the money, safe enough," said he, after searching the dead man's pockets;—and securing the bank-notes about his own person, he demanded of Mrs. Brace whether she had any settled plan respecting the disposal of the corpse.

"My idea was to bury it beneath the pavement in the back kitchen," responded the milliner.

"Capital!" ejaculated Dray: "it is the best course to adopt—and singular enough, the dustman left his shovel by accident behind him a few days ago and has never called for it since. Come—lend me a hand with the body, and we will carry him down stairs as gently as possible."

Thus speaking, the footman raised the corpse up to a sitting posture; and stooping down behind it, he wound his arms about the burly form, while Harriet, who had by this time regained her presence of mind, lifted up the feet. Mrs. Brace threw the cloth once more over the head of her victim; and carrying the light in her hand, she led the way from the bath-room.

Through her bed-chamber was the corpse thus borne—and down the stairs was it conveyed as noiselessly as possible. Frederick Dray was a young man of extraordinary strength and muscular power; and he sustained nearly the entire weight of the heavy inanimate mass of human clay, Harriet merely supporting the feet in the descent. Often did they pause to listen whether any one besides themselves was moving in the house; and sometimes, when the staircase creaked or Frederick unavoidably staggered against the ballusters, a mortal terror struck to the hearts of the two women lest the whole dwelling should be alarmed by the sounds. As for the footman himself, *he* took the entire proceeding with remarkable coolness and managed it in such a perfectly business-like way that had he been a resurrection-man he could not have exhibited a more complete indifference at the handling of a dead body. But although this cold and imperturbable disposition was the very one to enlist in such a matter, it was likewise that which was most to be dreaded afterwards;—and this idea struck like a pang to the brain of Mrs. Brace as she led the way with the candle in her hand.

At length the bottom of the staircase was reached—and now the descent of the flight leading to the kitchen was begun. This was more difficult because the steps were precipitate: but in a few minutes the task was accomplished, and the corpse was deposited upon the pavement of the back kitchen.

A bottle of wine was now procured from the cellar; and, invigorated by the generous juice of the grape, Frederick resumed his labours. By means of a poker which was worn away almost to a point, he succeeded in raising one of the flagstones wherewith the back kitchen was paved; and the shovel which the dustman had left behind now became serviceable in digging out the earth. The young man toiled arduously: the perspiration streamed off him—and Mrs. Brace and Harriet, who watched him with profound interest, were both astonished at the progress which he made. From time to time he paused to rest and refresh himself with a glass of wine; and then, as if inspired by renewed fervour, he returned to his task with the resolute determination of a man working for a wager.

And Frederick Dray's thoughts were all the while as active as his arms. He knew that it only required one good chance in the life of a man to enable him to make his fortune; and such an opportunity had presented itself to him this night. The milliner was rich—and she was now completely in his power: for he had indeed penetrated as profoundly into the truth of the matter as she had feared and suspected. But he toiled hard to clear away all traces of her crime, because it was by no means consistent with his own interests that it should be brought to light: on the contrary, it was a

secret which he was most anxious to surround with as many defences as possible, so that he alone should be enabled to hold it in terror over the head of the unhappy woman!

Such were his reflections as he plied the spade with all the vigour of his muscular arms: but the task was by no means an easy one. For the soil was very hard—he had not the requisite implements to break it up ere he shovelled it out—and it was moreover necessary to dig to a great depth in order that a sufficiency of earth might cover the corpse so as to prevent any disagreeable odour from exhaling hereafter.

Three hours therefore elapsed before the grave was hollowed to receive the murdered man,—three mortal hours, during which both Mrs. Brace and Harriet passed through all the torturing transitions of lively alarm, cold terror, profound apprehension, and awful suspense. Sometimes they fancied they heard noises in the house—footsteps descending the stairs—persons breathing in the passage communicating with the front kitchen—or windows opening in the upper rooms;—and then their hair almost stood on end and the perspiration burst forth in large and ice-cold drops upon their foreheads. At other moments they would goad themselves to desperation with the thought that Frederick could not possibly complete his task before morning—that even if he were able, the trace of the deed would not be altogether annihilated—that some clue must inevitably remain, and that detection was sure to follow. Then Mrs. Brace on the one hand fancied that she already found herself arraigned at the bar of justice as a murderess; while Harriet in imagination saw herself accused as an accessory after the fact. For although the abigail believed her mistress's representation that the constable had died of apoplexy, she nevertheless knew full well that were the corpse discovered in the grave which Frederick was digging to receive it, the dread cry of murder would be instantaneously raised.

Yes—three mortal hours thus passed, during which the murderess of mature age and the young woman in the bloom of youth were tortured with all the poignant imaginings of their fevered fancies. And they dared not express to each other how tensely their feelings were thus wrung—much less suffer Frederick Dray to observe how excruciating were their thoughts. For they were fearful of imparting their own terrors to him, thereby paralysing the only arm which could now work to save them: but the furtive glances which they stole at each other met at last and revealed to each how profoundly they were both suffering.

But at length the grave was dug—and the two women assisted Frederick to ascend from its depth. The corpse of the Bow Street Officer was then rolled into the hole; and the young man addressed himself to the task of shovelling back the earth which he had thrown up in two great mounds, one on each side of the grave. Every now and then he leaped into the hollow to trample down the soil; and the nearer its surface grew towards the level of the pavement, the more easily did Mrs. Brace and Harriet appear to breathe.

The clock struck four as the footman trod down the last layer of earth; for the grave was now full—and still a large quantity of the soil remained heaped up by the side. But Fredrick seemed fully prepared to encounter every embarrassment which presented itself—and such an one as this was naturally foreseen by him from the very first. Having procured a large sheet, he spread it out upon the floor—threw the superfluous soil upon it—gathered up the four corners—and thus converted it into a sort of sack, which he was enabled to carry upon his shoulders. He then passed cautiously out into the back yard, and emptied the contents of the sheet into the privy. This operation he had to perform three times before the whole of the superfluous soil was fully disposed of.

He was now well nigh exhausted: the frequent applications he made to Mrs. Brace's excellent wine, had hitherto sustained him throughout his arduous labours;—but the effect of the artificial stimulant was beginning to produce a rapid reaction, and it was necessary to imbibe a considerable quantity ere he could muster energy sufficient to re-place the huge stone over the mouth of the grave. This portion of the task was however accomplished at length; while Harriet compounded a mixture of white-lead, sand, and earth, which she reduced by means of oil to the consistency of putty, and with which the flag-stone was not only fixed in its setting, but the interstices were filled up.

The back-kitchen was now swept carefully with a carpet-broom; and Frederick walked several times over the stone, treading upon it in every point, to assure himself that it was firmly placed and did not tremble beneath the feet. The result of this test was perfectly satisfactory; and thus had every trace of the crime disappeared!

The clock of St. James's church was striking five, as Mrs. Brace, Harriet, and Frederick Dray quitted the place where they had buried the corpse of the police-constable; and, retiring noiselessly to their respective chambers, they were all speedily plunged by sheer exhaustion into a profound slumber.

CHAPTER CXXXIX.

THE TWO NOBLEMEN.

A WEEK had elapsed since the occurrences just related, and it was about eleven in the forenoon that the handsome but effeminate young Lord Florimel was seated in the breakfast-parlour at his elegant mansion in Piccadilly.

He was dressed in the negligent attire of a robe-de-chambre and slippers; and he was perusing a tender note which he had just received from Pauline Clarendon, who was still staying at the Duchess of Devonshire's villa near Aylesbury. The communication spoke favourably in respect to poor Octavia, and contained the most fervent assurances of the fair writer's unchanging love for the young nobleman.

Florimel was already in the midst of his second perusal of this note, when the door was opened gently and a black page entered the room.

This sable menial was apparently between fourteen and fifteen years of age. Of low stature and slender shape, his form was nevertheless of a symmetry alike elegant and graceful; and his movements were as noiseless as if he were an aerial being. Though his skin was as black as an African's, yet in his features had he nothing characteristic of the negro race. On

the contrary, his hair, which was curled in a myriad small ringlets over his shoulders, was of silken fineness; and his facial outline was delicate and pretty. His eyes were large and sparkled with intelligence; and his beautiful teeth gleamed like pearls between the lips which were rather full, but of a lively red. His hands were delicate and even girlish in their appearance—for the fingers were long and exquisitely tapered, and the fine almond-shaped nails were of a pellucid roseate tint.

But although the fire of intellect sparkled in the eyes of this boy, who appeared to belong to some East Indian race, yet were his manners so subdued that it was impossible to converse with him many minutes without receiving the impression that hewas either of a sullen and morose disposition, or that he had some profound grief preying upon his mind. He spoke English perfectly: but his replies were always given in the fewest words, and in monosyllables if possible. He was nevertheless active and willing in the performance of his duties; and there was something almost amounting to the mysterious in the manner in which he glided in and out of the rooms with his tread so light and noiseless.

Such was the strange but interesting boy that now entered the breakfast-parlour where Lord Florimel was seated: but he did not open his lips until the young nobleman, hearing the door close very gently, raised his eyes and beheld the sable page.

"Well, Rao?" he said, inquiringly.

"Lord Montgomery, may it please your lordship," returned the boy, in a low and silvery voice, his form bending slightly but with a graceful inclination at the same time.

"Show his lordship in, Rao," exclaimed Florimel. "You should not have made him wait in the hall."

"I am sorry, my lord," responded the boy, in the same low, quiet, and harmonious voice; "and I will not do it again."

"You are a good youth, Rao," said the young nobleman, in a kind tone.

The black page acknowledged this compliment with a more perceptible inclination of his slender form; and, gliding from the room, he almost immediately returned to usher in Earl Montgomery.

This nobleman, whose name has already been more than once mentioned in our narrative, was about thirty years of age. His countenance was a perfect specimen of manly beauty, the facial outline being of the pure Greek form, and the fire of the large dark eyes being only subdued by the long jetty lashes which shaded them. His brows were grandly arched; and his fine forehead seemed fitted to serve as the throne of the noblest thoughts: but there was a certain expression about the mouth which somewhat nullified the effect of the upper part of the countenance. Yet that mouth was perfect as a feature—small, with lips neither too thin nor too full—and furnished with teeth white and pure as those of a charming woman. Nevertheless there was at times a certain curl—or rather a mingled wreathing and compression of those lips—which gave a sinister look to the whole countenance and thus marred the open, frank, and generous aspect of the noble forehead and the magnificent brows. It must however have been a tolerably acute observer to notice this effect; and thus to the world in general Lord Montgomery's countenance appeared to combine every essential to perfect manly beauty.

His hair was black, curling naturally, and shining with so rich a gloss of its own, as to render needless the unguents of perfumers; and he possessed a superb pair of whiskers which were slightly tinged with a dark auburn at the roots, but speedily grew into a black as jetty and as bright as the hair. His stature was of the middling height; and his form combined graceful symmetry with muscular power. He dressed well—had a rich melodious voice—sang an excellent song—was a famous horseman—had a taste for literature and wrote beautiful poetry—danced gracefully—fenced admirably—was considered to be somewhat addicted to all kinds of fashionable dissipation—and was therefore a great favourite both with the male and female portions of the aristocratic world.

Such was Lord Montgomery—a British peer, with an estate tolerably well encumbered by mortgages, and whose signature was by no means unknown amongst the bill-discounters in the city: but he was wont to profess great confidence as to the law-suit which was pending in Chancery with regard to the Bellenden estates, and in the result of which process he had no mean interest.

Rao, the black page, having duly ushered Lord Montgomery into the presence of his master, immediately retired; and the greetings which took place between the two noblemen indicated the very friendly terms whereon they stood with each other.

"We have been quite strangers lately, my dear Gabriel," said the Earl, taking a seat; "and, therefore I was resolved to call upon you thus early this morning, and have a friendly confabulation."

"No one could possibly be more welcome, Eugene," returned Florimel. "And how progresses the law-suit?"

"Favourably enough, I think—and indeed, I hope," observed Lord Montgomery. "Heaven knows it is pretty nearly time that it should be decided in one way or another, considering that it has now lasted no less than thirty years."

"But how, in the name of common sense, can it have been thus protracted?" demanded Lord Florimel.

"In the first place, my dear friend," responded Montgomery, "every one knows that it is much more easy to get into Chancery than to get out of it. A more infamous tribunal never disgraced civilization, the Inquisition perhaps being alone excepted. Well, then, the delays of that accursed court have been the prominent and inevitable enemies against which we have had to contend. In the second place there has been an almost endless trouble in settling the precise manner in which the suits were to be carried on: because there were numerous old wills to consult, pedigrees to examine, marriage-settlements to rake up, certificates of birth to find, and registers of burial to ferret out, before it could be established who ought to be the exact claimants."

"But I thought that the suits were renewed, after a temporary suspension, by your mother on behalf of yourself and your brother Raymond, when you were both boys?" said Lord Florimel inquiringly.

"Your surmise is substantially correct, my dear friend," returned Lord Montgomery. "The process was originally commenced by my father thirty years ago, which was just about the time of my birth. My brother Raymond was born eight years later——"

"What! is he only twenty-two at this moment?" exclaimed Florimel. "I thought he was at least a couple of years older: but then my acquaintance with him is very slight."

"Well, as I was observing," continued Lord Montgomery, hastily resuming the thread of his narrative, and not pausing to notice Florimel's remarks,—"the suit had lasted eight years when my brother Raymond was born; and almost at the same time my father died. Then it was discovered that by some traditionary privilege or peculiarity of entail, the claim to the Warwickshire estates had become vested in Raymond; while my own claims, although the elder son, regarded only the Priory with its annexed property. Scarcely did the lawyers ferret out those facts from the depths of mouldy documents and musty pedigrees, when it suddenly transpired that the Aylmer family had likewise some vague and indistinct claims upon a portion of the Warwickshire property; and thus the whole affair presented a curious but not the less bewildering imbroglio."

"And all this time the Marquis of Bellenden was in possession and enjoyment of the whole property—was he not?" inquired Florimel.

"Precisely so," answered Montgomery: "and as he was an amorous old fellow of sixty-two, my mother hit upon a method of settling the law disputes amicably and to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. She had an orphan niece dwelling with her—a beautiful girl named Laura; and she negotiated a marriage between this lovely creature and the sexagenarian Marquis of Belleuden. The alliance took place; and the documents were drawn up to the effect that, in default of male issue, all the disputed estates should become the property of *our* family at the death of the Marquis,—the Aylmers consenting to receive a sum of ready money as an inducement to waive all *their* claims. But, behold! the Marquis died suddenly, before the deeds were signed; and confusion became worse confounded. The widowed Marchioness—my beau-

tiful cousin Laura—evinced so decided a spirit of her own that my mother could not bring her to any terms, nor induce her to listen to reason; and the law-suits were accordingly renewed, as you just now expressed yourself, after the temporary suspension."

"And that renewal took place twenty years ago—did it not?" inquired Florimel.

"Yes—and consequently when I was ten years old and my brother Raymond two," said Earl Montgomery. "Our mother revived the process on our behalf; and its slow length has been dragged along until the present time, my cousin the Marchioness fighting us step by step."

"Did the Aylmers renounce their claims upon that portion of the Warwickshire property to which they had considered themselves entitled?" asked Lord Florimel.

"The affairs of the Aylmer family soon afterwards fell into such confusion," replied Eugene Montgomery, "and death made such havoc amongst its members, that every claim seemed to be abandoned in that quarter; and the only representative of that family who was at last left, was a female infant of whom the Earl of Desborough took charge. This child grew up——"

"Ah—your cousin Fernanda Aylmer?" exclaimed Lord Florimel.

"Or rather Lady Holderness," said Montgomery. "Well, within the last few months she has asserted her right to the portion of the Warwickshire estates previously claimed by her family; and thus the Aylmers and Montgomeries are once more battling with the Bellendens. Do you now comprehend the position of this very intricate affair?"

"Perfectly, my dear friend," answered Lord Florimel: "you never explained it to me so lucidly and minutely before. But if you, your brother Raymond, and Lady Holderness all three succeed in these suits, the Marchioness of Bellenden will be completely stripped of all her possessions?"

"Except the income which she derives from a certain sum in the funds, and which produces her about two thousand a-year," said Lord Montgomery.

"And do you really expect that you will all three succeed in the law suits?" asked Florimel.

"I confess that I am very sanguine," returned Lord Montgomery. "My brother Raymond's rights to the Warwickshire estates are all but proven; and Fernanda will not experience much difficulty in making good the validity of her claims. But my case, which refers, you must remember, to the Priory property,—is a little more complex. However, the Lord Chancellor must decide upon the matter soon; and I shall be truly glad when all suspense is over."

"I can well believe you, my dear Eugene," said Lord Florimel. "For my part, I would not have a law-suit for the world."

"And yet there are scarcely any title-deeds which do not contain some flaw or leave some opening for quibble and dispute," observed Montgomery, "Indeed, some persons hold and enjoy large estates without possessing any title-deeds at all: for through the habit of entrusting such documents to one's solicitor, they are frequently lost or destroyed by accident——"

"And sometimes intentionally, no doubt," added Florimel. "But I keep all my papers and parchments in a tin-box under my bed——Ah! what do you want, Rao?" demanded the young nobleman, suddenly interrupting himself to address that question to his black page, who had glided with his usual noiseless step into the room, where he had indeed remained unperceived for upwards of a minute.

The sable youth made no verbal reply, but handed his master a letter upon a silver salver: he then bowed and withdrew as silently as he had entered.

"How long have you had that page, Gabriel?" inquired Lord Montgomery as soon as the door closed behind the object of this query.

"Only a week," answered the young nobleman.

"I hope you had good references with him," said Montgomery.

"Why so?" demanded Florimel, surprised at the observation.

"Oh! I don't know—'twas an idea which entered my head at the time," exclaimed Montgomery. "But the truth is, I do not like that noiseless way of gliding imperceptibly in and out of a room; and that boy made me almost shudder at the moment, as if it were a black snake creeping in with so much sinister mystery."

"Such a prejudice against poor Rao is ridiculous, Eugene," cried Florimel, in a tone of remonstrance: "and if we were not intimate friends, I should really feel indignant at the unjust suspicion which your words imply."

"Well, let us change the subject, my dear fellow," said Montgomery. "What have you got there?" he inquired, as Florimel opened the letter which had been brought in.

"A card for a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre," replied the young nobleman. "Who on earth could have sent me this?" he exclaimed, turning the card over and over in his hands.

"Is there nothing written inside the envelop?" asked Lord Montgomery.

"Nothing," said Florimel. "And the address outside is evidently penned in a feigned hand," he added, scrutinizing the superscription with attention. "But I have not the least knowledge of this writing—not the remotest suspicion——"

"And yet the writer must be afraid of her penmanship being detected," remarked Lord Montgomery: "or else wherefore should she attempt to disguise it?"

"It is strange—very strange," said Florimel, in a musing tone and with his eyes still fixed upon the envelop. "The handwriting is evidently that of a lady, who has tortured its natural fluency into a stiff and awkward scrawl."

"An intrigue is at the bottom of this proceeding," observed Lord Montgomery; "and you must go to the masquerade. Doubtless you have captivated the heart of some lady who mingles discretion with her gallantry and conducts her amours with precaution; and she has therefore adopted these means of obtaining an interview with you. For my part—— But, by Jove! here is the black page again!"

And Montgomery actually shuddered as he beheld Rao gliding noiselessly into the apartment like a black spirit.

The boy stopped suddenly short as that ejaculation struck upon his ear; and his black eyes, after darting a keen and penetrating look upon the nobleman who had uttered it, swept towards Lord Florimel, on whose countenance they remained fixed for a few moments: then as if satisfied by this scrutiny, or

relieved from some apprehension which had started up in his mind, the sable youth resumed his noiseless course, and approaching his master, he placed a large parcel upon the table before him.

"Well, Rao—what is this?" demanded Florimel, perceiving that the youth had something to say but did not choose to speak until questioned.

"It was delivered, my lord, at the same time with the letter," said the boy, in his subdued tone of musical cadence; "but the hall-porter forgot to give it to me."

"And who brought the letter and this parcel?" inquired Florimel.

"A ticket-porter, who immediately departed, my lord," was the boy's response.

Rao then retired, Earl Montgomery following him with his eyes until he disappeared by the door which it seemed he had a knack of opening and shutting in a manner as noiseless as his own footsteps.

"What have you got now, Gabriel?" inquired the Earl, turning towards his young friend, who was opening the large brown paper parcel which had just been brought in.

"A blue domino, by heavens!" ejaculated Florimel, unfolding the ample garment, which was edged with a peculiar braiding and had a sort of star made of the same material upon the crown of the hood.

"The fair unknown whose heart you have captivated," said Montgomery, "is determined that the adventure shall be as completely romantic and as well defended by judicious precautions as possible. You are to wear this domino in order that she may recognise you at the masquerade for which she has sent you a card; and the costume is purposely signalised with braiding in such a manner that no mistake may arise, even should there be a dozen blue dominos in the room. You are a fortunate fellow, Gabriel," added Earl Montgomery: "for all these precautions and the evident anxiety which exists to shroud the adventure in as profound a secrecy as possible, naturally lead us to infer that the fair unknown is some lady of exalted rank and untarnished reputation. Altogether, the intrigue promises to be of a piquancy sufficient to move an anchorite."

"And yet I shall not keep the appointment nor accept the overtures thus mysteriously made," said Lord Florimel, whose manner had gradually fallen into a strange abstraction.

"Not keep the appointment!—not accept the overtures!" echoed Montgomery, with the most unfeigned astonishment. "Are you in earnest, Florimel?—or have you so little faith in my friendship and discretion, that you are afraid I shall betray you to the beautiful Miss Pauline Clarendon?"

"Those are not my reasons, Eugene," said the young nobleman, in a very serious tone: "but I will unhesitatingly admit, even at the risk of being well laughed at by you, that I am resolved—indeed, I have sworn—never to commit an act of perfidy towards Pauline. Therefore, my dear Eugene, I shall not take any further notice of the overtures whereby I have been honoured; and if you really value my friendship, you will not make the slightest attempt to dissuade me from my purpose. Poor Pauline! she loves me so devotedly—and she has latterly experienced so much affliction on account of her father's inauspicious marriage and other circumstances of a domestic nature, that I could not find it in my heart to plunge headlong into this intrigue, even though I were certain that it would never reach her ears."

"After all you have said, my dear Gabriel," cried Lord Montgomery, "I cannot do otherwise than respect your decision. At the same time, I most sincerely wish that such an adventure would offer itself to me. By Jove! nothing could be more amusing—nothing more exciting! I suppose you would not like the idea of allowing me to assume that blue domino and take your place at the approaching masquerade?"

"My dear Eugene, such a proposal is unworthy of you," said Lord Florimel, in a tone of grave remonstrance. "Would it be honourable to the lady in question, whoever she may be——"

"I was only joking, Gabriel," interrupted the Earl, who nevertheless bit his lip with vexation. "Of course this is a secret which you must keep religiously and as a man of honour. But wherefore are you thus serious?—and why is your air so preoccupied? There is evidently something on your mind besides the present topic of conversation."

"To speak candidly," said Lord Florimel, after nearly a minute's profound silence and deep meditation, "the overtures conveyed by that masquerade-ticket and the blue domino, have reminded me of an adventure which occurred fifteen months ago, before my brother's sudden death conferred upon me the family title and estates. The adventure to which I allude was of a most extraordinary character; and I could not help just now associating it somewhat with the present overtures—although there is not any substantial ground to warrant the supposition that the lady concerned in the former affair is the same who has sent me the masquerade-card and the blue costume."

"And that adventure of which you are speaking," said Lord Montgomery, whose curiosity was excited,—"is it a secret? or may I without indiscretion beg you to relate it?"

"I do not think that there can be any breach of honour on my part in making you acquainted with the singular occurrence," returned Florimel: "especially as no pledge of secrecy was exacted from me at the time, and no particular lady's reputation can possibly suffer by the narrative."

"Pray proceed: I am all attention," said Lord Montgomery, drawing his chair closer to that of his young friend.

"You are aware, my dear Eugene," began Florimel, "that as my late brother was unmarried and was of an exceedingly nervous temperament, I dwelt with him in this house after I left College; and although he exercised a species of parental espionage over me, as he was so much older than myself, yet I deemed it a duty to bestow as much of my time and attention upon him as possible. One day we received an invitation to a grand entertainment which was to take place at Devonshire House; and much as my brother disliked the bustle, brilliancy, and splendid confusion of such fêtes, he nevertheless felt himself bound to be present at this one, inasmuch as her Grace of Devonshire is related to our family. Thither we accordingly repaired on the appointed evening; and the magnificent saloons were already crowded with the *élite* of fashion when we were announced. In a short time the heat of the rooms became overpowering, despite the vases of refreshing perfume which stood in the corners of the apartments, and the green-house plants and flowers which were profusely arranged around the landing-places and in the brilliantly-lighted

passages: for it was in the middle of winter that this entertainment was given. Towards midnight my brother suffered so much from the intensity of the heat that he was compelled to return home the instant the carriage, which had been ordered to attend early, was announced: but he would not permit me to accompany him. On the contrary, he bade me remain and enjoy myself until the end; and he observed that although he should send back the carriage to wait for me, I need not be in any hurry on that account. I thanked him for his kind consideration—assisted him into the carriage—and then returned to the ball-rooms, where I entered fully into the spirit of the scene. It was about two o'clock in the morning that the company began to break up; and then commenced in the adjacent streets all that confusion, noise, bustle, and din which invariably attend upon the vast muster of carriages on such an occasion. The hall and the grand entrance of the ducal mansion were crowded with the guests waiting for the announcement of their respective equipages; —the footmen were bawling out for the carriages which were in requisition—the link-boys repeated the cries—the coachmen responded from all directions—and these vociferations were mingled with the crashing sounds of wheels and the tramplings of horses' hoofs. At that moment there could not have been less than five or six hundred carriages in the vicinage of Devonshire House; and the arrangements to marshal and muster them appeared to have been singularly neglected. I had undertaken to escort Lady Bonnycastle and her daughter; and, having after some difficulty succeeded in getting up their barouche to the gate, I had just handed them in and bowed the parting salutation, when, as their carriage was whirled away, another dashed up to the entrance. '*Who's next?*' demanded the stentorian voice of the porter of Devonshire House.—'*Lord Florimel's carriage!*' replied a tall footman in dark livery, springing down from behind the vehicle which had just driven up and opening the door with alacrity.—'*That is not my brother's carriage,*' I exclaimed, the hasty glance which I threw at it convincing me there must be some mistake.—'*All right, sir! This is for the Honourable Mr. Florimel,*' said the tall footman in dark livery, touching his hat: and before I could utter another syllable or ask a word of explanation, I was lifted as it were by the fellow's vigorous arm up the steps into the vehicle—the door was banged—I became suddenly enveloped in total darkness—and the abrupt jerk with which the carriage whirled away threw me completely back upon the seat. At that moment my hand came in contact with the silken skirt of a female dress; and before even an ejaculation of astonishment could escape my lips, I was clasped in the arms of a lady whose warm cheek instantaneously came in contact with my own—whose bosom heaved against my chest —and whose voice, tremulous with mingled fervour and triumph, whispered in my ear, '*Fear nothing, Florimel—and pardon one who loves you!*'—Then, returning the ardour of the embrace in which I was so suddenly caught and so firmly locked, I gave back the impassioned kisses which were the next moment lavished upon me; and for many minutes not another word was spoken inside that vehicle."

"You gave back the kisses," said Lord Montgomery, laughing; "and it might have been some old woman who had adopted this stratagem to win you to her arms."

"Oh! believe me, my dear Eugene," exclaimed Florimel, "that although the darkness of the tomb prevailed within that carriage—for the wooden blinds were all drawn up,—yet no sooner did I come in contact with that warm and glowing form—no sooner did I feel the firm plump bosom heaving in its rich luxuriance against my breast—and no sooner did I taste as it were the luscious moisture of the lips and drink in the fragrance of the balmy breath,—Oh! no sooner, I say, was I thus suddenly plunged into the sweets of paradise, than I became well aware that such raptures emanated only from the companionship of a most desirable woman. And abandoning myself to the thrilling and ecstatic feelings which were inspired alike by her impassioned ardour and by the charming novelty of this adventure, I became intoxicated as it were with the perfume of voluptuousness which stole upon my senses as a delicious dream sheds its influence upon the mind. Nothing could equal the intense fervour of those caresses which my companion lavished upon me in the midst of that pitchy darkness: her kisses were long, burning, and devouring—as if she threw her whole soul into the profound sensuousness of her enjoyment. And when I gave back those caresses, she strained me to her bosom with all the indomitable fervour of her maddened desire—and with a violence which even hurt me, but which she had no power to control: while, beneath the influence of the kisses which I imprinted upon her lips, I felt her whole form twist, writhe, and undulate as it were in my arms like a silken cord that is shaken. For there was something even ferocious in the desires of that woman—something furious and raging in the headlong whirl of her passions!"

"By heaven! this is one of the most extraordinary adventures I ever heard," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and if I did not know you so intimately, Gabriel, I should conceive that you were endeavouring to amuse me with a romance."

"I am telling you the exact truth, on my most solemn and sacred word of honour!" returned Lord Florimel.

"Such an asseveration is quite unnecessary, my dear friend," said Montgomery. "But pray proceed with your narrative: I am dying to learn the result."

"For some minutes," resumed the young nobleman, "I gave myself up entirely to the voluptuous enjoyment of that strange and mysterious adventure, as a man in a dream resolves to drink his fill of those elysian sweets into the midst of which his fancy wafts him. The darkness which prevailed was that of hell: but the pleasure which I enjoyed was that of paradise. And all this time the carriage was whirling rapidly along; and I neither cared nor took the trouble to conjecture whither it could be bearing me, or what was to be the issue of my adventure. The intoxicating cup of ineffable bliss was at my lips; and I abandoned myself to the delirious ecstasies of the draught, without pausing to reflect whether poison was mingled with its sweets. At length I said in a low murmuring whisper—for there was such a deep and absorbing mystery in this adventure, that it almost appeared to me as if loud-speaking would break the spell of pleasure and disenchant the glowing vision,—'*Beautiful unknown,*' I said, '*you have taught me the way to paradise: but the means you have adopted to entice me into this path of pleasure, have been somewhat of the most extraordinary.*'—

'*If then, dear Florimel,*' she replied, '*you consider that you owe me any obligation for this adventure, the only recompense I demand is that you will seek no explanation from my lips, and that you will yield a ready assent to any little arrangement which I may deem necessary to ensure the continued envelopment of our amour in the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable mystery.*'—And then she strained me with renewed fervour to her bosom and lavished upon me the tenderest caresses; and, inebriated by the floods of delight that were thus poured in unto my soul, I vowed in the most solemn manner to obey my fair unknown in all things, so long as she suffered me to enjoy the pleasure of her society. Soon afterwards the carriage stopped; and the nature of the precautions to which she had alluded now became apparent—for she tied a silk handkerchief over my eyes before even the domestic had time to open the door of the vehicle. We then alighted; and guided by her fair hand from which my own received a re-assuring pressure every moment, I was led hastily forward. A gate closed behind us—on we went—and it struck me that we were threading the gravel-walk of a garden or similar enclosure. In a couple of minutes we paused: my companion let go my hand for a moment—I heard a key turn in a lock—a door opened—my hand was again taken in the warm grasp that gave me a re-assuring pressure—we entered some building—and once more did the lady pause to shut and fasten the door behind us. She then conducted me up a staircase so thickly carpetted that even the clumsiest boots and the heaviest footsteps must have passed noiselessly over it;—and finally I was escorted along a passage into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed."

"And the handkerchief was removed from your eyes, doubtless," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and you beheld the charming heroine of your romantic adventure?"

"Oh! how erroneous are all your surmises, my dear friend!" cried Lord Florimel. "What! do you suppose that all the precautions which had hitherto been adopted to steep this amour in the profoundest mystery, were suddenly to cease and even be counteracted by allowing my eyes to gaze upon that woman who had studied to draw so impenetrable a veil around her frailty and screen her sensual enjoyments from the possibility of detection? No—no: the adventure progressed not in the manner which you have conjectured. The atmosphere of that chamber was warm: but the heat came from an invisible source—for there was neither fire nor lamp to throw even the faintest glimmer upon the pitchy darkness which prevailed in that boudoir of love and mystery. The handkerchief was indeed removed from my eyes: but there was not so much as a streak of light to indicate the position of the windows. No—the shutters must have been well closed or the curtains made of the thickest material: and yet the heat of the room was not stifling nor the atmosphere stagnant. It was a wholesome air, though warm and perfumed; and it seemed to breathe a soft sensuousness which made me picture to myself all the luxury of a chamber devoted to the mysteries of love. But I was not allowed much leisure for reflection or needless conjecture: for my companion conducted me to a sofa, on which we reclined ourselves—and an adjacent table supplied wine, a goblet of which she conveyed to my lips with her own hand. Then she led me towards a couch—and in a few minutes we were locked in each other's arms."

"Do you suppose that it was her own house, or some place which she had hired for the occasion?" asked Lord Montgomery, whose curiosity was piqued in a most lively manner.

"It is impossible to say," returned Florimel. "I am narrating to you everything just as the adventure occurred to me; and you are positively as capable of making your conjectures as I am myself. At all events I may observe that the lady was familiar enough with every nook, corner, and detail of the chamber to which she had thus conducted me; and if it were not her own, it is very certain that she must have often visited it before. It was large, and evidently furnished in a luxurious manner: the table stood between the sofa and the bed; —and near the head of the bed there was a large arm-chair, in which I remember depositing my clothes. But it is useless to enter into these details, inasmuch as the whole adventure defies conjecture, and its mystery will most probably be never unravelled. That some lady of rank experienced a caprice with regard to myself, and adopted those means of gratifying her transitory whim, is tolerably certain: but that I shall ever learn who she is or discover the house to which I was conducted on that memorable night, I do not imagine for a moment. Her precautions were certainly adopted with admirable effect; and so confident was she in their success, that she did not even seek to bind me by oaths or promises to secrecy in respect to the adventure itself. But the very nature of the precautions which she had taken, fully proved how imperious was the necessity for adopting them; and therefore we may safely suppose that it was some lady of no ordinary standing in society, or whose reputation was incalculably dear."

"And yet others must have been in her secret," exclaimed Lord Montgomery: "for the coachman who drove her carriage and the footman in attendance upon it, could not have done otherwise than obey special instructions;—and then there was most likely a lady's-maid in her confidence also——"

"Those ideas have suggested themselves to me more than once," interrupted Lord Florimel; "and I confess that I have been lost in amazement and perplexity when I have reflected upon the astounding fact that the unknown lady must have risked exposure at the hands of her servants while adopting such immense precautions to screen her identity from her lover! She could not put confidence in *me*: but she placed herself at the mercy of *her dependants!*"

"Strange inconsistency!" ejaculated Lord Montgomery. "But do you not remember the livery which her servants wore?—have you never since seen the same carriage?—could you obtain no information at Devonshire House whose equipage it was?"

"Your questions remind me, my dear Eugene," said Florimel, "that I have not yet made an end of my narrative. You will remember I informed you that it was about two o'clock in the morning when I was precipitated as it were into the midst of that romantic adventure, as a man may be suddenly hurled from a rock to be received upon a bed of roses in the abyss beneath. Well, our ride to the unknown dwelling did not occupy more than twenty minutes at the outside; and therefore by half-past two I was comfortably located in the voluptuous but dark boudoir.

For about four hours did I there enjoy the companionship of the mysterious genius of the place. Oh! those four hours of intoxicating passion and elysian ecstasy! Often and often have I since asked myself whether it was a delicious dream or a bewildering reality. And that it was the latter I am well assured: for who that had experienced the raptures which it was my blessed fortune to enjoy, could possibly attribute them to a delusion? No—the thrilling ecstasy of those devouring kisses which were lavished upon me—the delicious contact of that full and voluptuous form which, naked and palpitating with the frenzied desires of a Bacchanal, I clasped in my arms—the burning moments of pleasure which I tasted in the embrace of that woman who imparted all the electricity of her own maddening passions to the soul of her lover,—Oh! these were not the phantasies of a vision, but the never-to-be-forgotten experiences of such a night of love, and mystery, and voluptuousness as only occurs once in the life-time of a man!"

"I would give ten years of my own existence to have been the hero of this adventure," said Lord Montgomery, surveying his friend with the most unfeigned envy. "But let me hear the result—for I see that you have more yet to tell me."

"Indeed the narrative is nearly brought to a close," returned Lord Florimel: "for at the expiration of the four hours, which glided away as if they were only as many minutes——"

"But how could you tell what time it was?" demanded Montgomery.

"Because a clock, apparently belonging to some adjacent church or chapel, chimed the half-hour," said Florimel, in explanation; "and then my fair companion murmured in a plaintive voice that it was half-past six and that we must separate. Literally tearing myself from her arms, I rose and put on my apparel in the dark, while she herself likewise resumed her clothing in a hurried manner. She then blindfolded me once more—conducted me along the passage back to the staircase, which we descended—and thence led me forth into the enclosure, the gravel-walk of which we threaded in a profound silence. But she held *both* my hands clasped in her own; and I guessed that her motive was to prevent me from raising the handkerchief surreptitiously from my eyes and thereby obtaining even that indistinct view of surrounding objects which may be sometimes procured between six and seven o'clock on a morning in the middle of winter. But I should not have attempted to penetrate her secret or solve the mystery of who she might be and where I was—no, I should not have moved the handkerchief a hair's-breadth from my eyes, even if my hands had been free. For I experienced at the moment a boundless gratitude towards that lady who had chosen me as the object of her sensual phantasy and who had thereby led me to pass four hours and upwards in the paradise of her society! Therefore was it that when we passed out of the gate of the enclosure and I knew by the sounds of horses champing their bits that a carriage was in attendance,—therefore was it, I say, that I implored her in a deep and fervid whisper to grant me an early repetition of the pleasure which I had enjoyed.—'*Yes, dear Florimel,*' she murmured, also in a voice tremulous with the reminiscences of recent delights, '*we will soon meet again. I shall not fail to adopt measures to bring you to my arms once more!*'—And then she pressed both my hands with ineffable tenderness; and in the next moment I was lifted as it were into the carriage, I have no doubt by the same vigorous arm which had performed a like feat at the gate of Devonshire House: the steps were raised rapidly—the door was closed with equal haste—and away, away was I whirled from the scene of that paradise of four hours' enjoyment!"

"And then you tore off the bandage—you looked out of the carriage window——" exclaimed Montgomery, actually exciting himself by the strength of the interest wherewith he allowed his friend's narrative to carry him away.

"Indeed, I did no such thing," interrupted Florimel: "and even if I had so instantaneously torn off the handkerchief, the proceeding would have been useless, as you shall presently learn. But the truth is that the moment I was thrown as it were upon the soft cushions of the carriage by that powerful arm which I had no doubt belonged to the tall lacquey who had previously served me in the same manner,—I fell into a deep but delicious reverie, in which I feasted my imagination with all the delights that I had just been enjoying in such blessed reality. At length I bethought myself that I was blindfolded; and starting from my profound meditations, I took off the handkerchief. The interior of the vehicle was of pitchy darkness; and I therefore knew that the wooden blinds must be drawn up. I endeavoured to open the one nearest to me: but it was fastened in its setting. I tried the one belonging to the other door—and my attempt was equally ineffectual. I felt in front of the carriage: but it was a barouche and had no windows there at all. Thus, my dear friend, do you perceive how completely baffled I should have been, had I obeyed any sudden impulse of the kind which you imagined to have seized upon me the moment I entered the vehicle. You likewise see how complete—how effectual—and yet how simple were the precautions adopted by that lady to screen herself from the knowledge of the man whom her phantasy had made the partner of her bed for four short hours!"

"The whole narrative is a perfect romance," exclaimed Montgomery: "I mean, in the intensity of its interest."

"Yes—and that interest is the more absorbing," said Florimel, "because the romance itself is one of real life. But I was going to bring my tale to a conclusion—and this can now be done in a few words. For in about twenty minutes from the time that I re-entered the carriage in the manner I have described, it stopped—and the door was opened by a tall man. But he was dressed in plain clothes—and the broad brim of his hat completely shaded his countenance; so that in fact he was not recognisable in the dim twilight of the misty winter-morning. A sudden impulse prompted me to retain possession of the handkerchief which had blindfolded my eyes and which might serve as a clue: but scarcely was the idea formed than it was discarded as mean, paltry, and contemptible to a degree. Moreover I experienced an instinctive feeling that by leaving it behind me in the vehicle, it would be regarded with all the significancy of a guarantee to the lady that I did not seek any unfair means of penetrating into that secret around which she had thrown the defences of so many precautions. These thoughts passed rapidly as light-

ding through my brain at the instant that the door was opened; and springing forth from the carriage, I instinctively gazed up at the house to see where it was that it had stopped. That rapid glance showed me that I had been put down at the door of my own home; but it was not so rapid as to be able to turn and take a deliberate survey of the carriage which had brought me thither. For as I looked round, the barouche was already dashing away—and in another moment it was lost to my view in the obscurity which still prevailed."

"But you caught a glimpse of the colour of that carriage?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery, inquiringly; "and you noticed whether there were armorial bearings upon the panels?"

"So far from having made any such observations," responded Florimel, "I should not have known the vehicle again, had I met it an hour afterwards. Nor would you have manifested a greater keenness of perception, had you been in my place: for when I was first thrust into the carriage at the gate of Devonshire House, the proceeding was so rapid and my confusion was so great that I had scarcely an instant to notice anything;—and again, when I alighted from the vehicle at the door of my own home, it glided away into the mist of the morning, quick as the glance which I sent after it. But if I dared hazard an opinion upon the subject—and if the slightest reminiscence did really remain on the point—then I should say that from the rapid and imperfect view which I had of the carriage when I was thrown as it were into it at the gate of Devonshire House, that it was a plain one and of a dark colour. But this may be all conjecture, and most likely is. I have now little more to say—and yet I will not omit a single detail, since you appear to be so interested in the narrative."

"I am indeed interested," exclaimed Lord Montgomery: "for it is altogether one of the most exciting, thrilling, and piquant adventures that I ever heard. But you had reached that point where you alighted from the carriage and it disappeared with such rapidity. What happened next?"

"Nothing very remarkable," returned Florimel, laughing: "I went up-stairs and sought my couch, where I slept soundly until the afternoon. I then rose, dressed myself, and descended to the breakfast-parlour, where I found my brother reading the newspaper. '*I hope you enjoyed yourself, Gabriel?*' he said, in a somewhat severe tone, as he eyed me suspiciously.—'*Very much,*' I answered, wondering what was uppermost in his mind.—'*But why did you send word that the carriage was not to return and fetch you away?*' he demanded, fixing his looks keenly upon me.—I started in amazement; for I had sent no such message at all. But the truth flashed to my mind in an instant; and I comprehended that my fair unknown must have been the authoress of that message countermanding *my brother's* carriage in order that *hers* might take its place and perform its part, as indeed it had so effectually done.—'*You have been in bad company, Gabriel,*' continued my brother, observing the changing colour of my cheeks and the emotion of my manner, and utterly mistaking the cause: nor did I choose to enlighten him upon the subject—but I allowed him to read me a long lecture on the impropriety of staying out until seven o'clock in the morning—and when he had concluded I hastened off to call at Devonshire House. For I will candidly confess that an invincible feeling of curiosity had by this time sprung up within me, subduing the chivalrous resolves which I had previously made never to seek to penetrate the mystery of the night's adventure;—and under the plea of leaving my card at the ducal residence, I made certain inquiries of the gate-keeper and the hall-porter, who had superintended the marshalling of the carriages when the party broke up. Those inquiries I of course instituted in a very guarded manner; and I was even enabled, in consequence of my intimacy and relationship with the Duchess, to question some of the footmen and pages belonging to the ducal establishment. No one, however, recollected the particular incident of a strange carriage taking me up;—and, in fine, I could glean in that quarter nothing at all calculated to throw any light upon the subject. Fifteen months have elapsed since that period—and I am still as much in the dark as ever."

"Then your fair unknown never fulfilled her promise of contriving another interview?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery.

"Never," replied Florimel.

"Again do I pronounce the adventure to be one full of the most charming romance," said the Earl; "and I am not surprised that it should have been so vividly recalled to your memory by the unmistakable overtures conveyed to you this morning by means of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. Depend upon it, Florimel, your mysterious unknown has adopted this method to obtain another interview; and you cannot possibly forego the pleasure——"

"I have already besought you as a friend, Eugene," said the young nobleman, in a serious tone, "not to tempt me from that allegiance which I am so anxious to maintain towards my beloved Pauline."

"Then you are determined not to accept the invitation to that masquerade?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "In a word, you will not go?"

"No—ten thousand times *no*," answered Florimel. "I have done so many foolish things in my life, that I may as well endeavour for once to do a wise one; and I have broken so many solemn pledges, that I am resolved to adhere faithfully to at least one promise at last. Do not, however, think that I cheerfully resign the chance of meeting my fair unknown again—if from her this card and this domino do really come: on the contrary, it will cost me a pang—but I shall feel more satisfied with myself afterwards."

Thus speaking, Lord Florimel tore up the masquerade-ticket and tossed the pieces into the fire;—and he then rang the bell.

Rao, the sable page, instantaneously glided into the room.

"Take this domino, my boy," said Florimel, "and burn it in the kitchen fire. I have particular reasons for wishing that this should be done immediately."

As Lord Florimel gave utterance to this singular command, Lord Montgomery started with evident uneasiness, and even stretched out his hand towards the domino as if in obedience to a sudden impulse prompting him to save it from the destruction to which it had just been doomed. At the same moment the black page laid his own hand on the garment; and Montgomery caught the rapid, piercing glance which Rao threw upon him.

"Let the boy take the domino, Eugene," said Florimel; "do not attempt to change my purpose, I implore you. When the domino is once destroyed,

it will be too late for me to alter my mind, even if the weakness of my nature should prevail."

"Be it so," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, scarcely able to restrain his vexation: and once more he caught the eyes of Rao fixed upon him with a significancy which he could not however fathom.

But the next moment the boy glided away with the domino; and Montgomery rose to take his leave.

"By the bye, have you seen our buxom and agreeable friend Mrs. Brace lately?" inquired Lord Florimel.

"Not very long ago," answered Montgomery. "Indeed to tell you the candid truth, I passed the night in her society——"

"In her arms, you mean," said Florimel, laughing.

"I do not deny the soft imputation," rejoined Montgomery. "But I do not think that she will ever again be honoured with my company in the same manner."

"And why so?" demanded Florimel. "Have you grown weary of her *tête-à-tête* suppers and buxom charms?"

"Not exactly," responded Montgomery. "But a little incident happened on the last occasion—rather a disagreeable occurrence indeed—in some respects——However, I must not reveal the secrets of a gallant woman," he exclaimed, hastily interrupting himself. "So farewell, my dear friend."

"Farewell," said the young nobleman.

Lord Montgomery took his departure: but as he was passing through the hall of Florimel's mansion, he observed the sable page Rao standing in a window-recess and evidently watching him with an interest more profound and definite than that of mere curiosity. But two or three liveried lacqueys were lounging about in the place, and a footman was ceremoniously preceding Lord Montgomery towards the front door which the hall-porter had already opened;—and therefore the Earl was more

than half-inclined to disobey a sudden impulse which now prompted him to address the boy.

But still perceiving that Rao's eyes were following him with a strange significancy, he could no longer resist the secret and almost mysterious influence which urged him to address the lad. He accordingly stepped up to him, and said in a laughing manner, "Well, Rao, have you burnt the domino?"

The boy's large black eyes swept rapidly round the hall for the evident purpose of ascertaining whether any of the domestics might be within earshot: and satisfied with the result of that glance of lightning speed, he fixed his looks with a peculiar expression of deep meaning upon Earl Montgomery, saying, "Did your lordship really wish that I should destroy the blue domino?"

The nobleman started and blushed—for he felt that the boy had read the secret thoughts which animated him respecting the masquerade: but the next moment it struck him that Rao's words might only mean a piece of covert impudence, and nothing more.

"You were compelled to obey your master's orders, doubtless," the Earl accordingly said, in a vague manner: "but it was a pity all the same."

"Ah! your lordship thinks that it was a pity?" murmured Rao, darting upon him a look which seemed to penetrate into the profoundest recesses of his soul: then in a tone of unmistakable significancy, he added, "But suppose that I had disobeyed my master's commands—would your lordship think the worse of me for it?"

"There is some hidden meaning in your looks and words, boy," returned Lord Montgomery; "and we cannot converse any longer in this place. Call upon me in the evening in Grafton Street——"

"Yes — at nine o'clock punctually," observed Rao: and he glided rapidly away from the window-recess, scarcely appearing to touch the chequered marble pavement of the hall with his feet, so light was his tread and so glancingly went his steps.

The preceding dialogue occupied scarcely a minute, although we have taken several to narrate it;—and not a syllable was overheard by the other domestics present. Nor were they surprised to behold Lord Montgomery stopping to address a few words to the black page, inasmuch as the boy had already attracted the notice and won the interest of every visitor to his master's mansion.

The Earl quitted the house, and returned to his own abode in Grafton Street, where he resided with his mother the Dowager-Countess.

CHAPTER CXL.

THE BEGGAR'S STAFF AGAIN.

RETURN we once more to that sink of iniquity in Horslydown, to which we have already familiarly introduced our readers and which was known by the sign of the Beggar's Staff.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening; and the long, low, ill-lighted room was filled with company —such company as was wont to frequent the place, and which consisted of bad characters of both sexes, all ages, and every variety of description.

The observer of human nature and the moralist would indeed have found food for earnest meditation in that apartment: for *there* might have been seen utter misery hardened into inveterate vice—ineffable suffering changed into complete demoralisation—and all those phases of debauchery, profligacy, and loathsome wantonness which become apparent in the drunken orgies of society's outcasts. But had the tale of each and all of those ruffian-like men and those profligate women been ascertained with a perfect accuracy of detail, it would have assuredly transpired that not one single individual was naturally depraved from the cradle, but that all had become the miserable victims of tyrannical laws, the vitiated institutions of an artificial society, the ignorance of legislators, or the downright despotism of rich monopolists or titled plunderers!

For, oh! to talk of the freedom of Englishmen and the happiness enjoyed by "true Britons," is the most despicable farce and the most hideous mockery in the world. That freedom is a delusion—that happiness is a lie! The millions in this land are as utterly the minions of the Aristocracy as Russian serfs are held at the mercy of their masters. The white slavery of England is a truth more real, more terrible, and more tremendous than the black slavery of the Southern States of the American Union. Oh! better, better far to be a negro in a Virginian plantation, than a "free-born" peasant on an estate in England; and more preferable is the condition of the purchased African at New Orleans than that of the mechanic of Manchester! For what is the spectacle which Great Britain, with its monarchical and aristocratic institutions, presents to the view? An absolute idolatry and the most servile worship paid to Royalty and Aristocracy on the one hand; while Royalty and Aristocracy on the other reward the sycophantic sentiment by testifying the most sovereign contempt for those who thus crouch at their feet. And to extend the picture, we have *two* millions of paupers and only *one* million of voters—more pawnbrokers than butchers—more gin-shops than bakers—and almost as many prisons and workhouses as churches! O blessed land of freedom, where such is the aspect presented to the eye! But this is not all: for in our agricultural districts we behold the peasant cheerless, sickly, half-starved, and feeble in the field—and our artizans pining and wasting with want in the factory! Our rural labourers dwell in the most wretched huts imaginable—while the industrious population of our cities and towns are crowded into hovels, and attics, and cellars, and cells, with *Pestilence* for their companion!

No—Great Britain is not free; nor are her institutions good—nor her government just—nor her social system humane. The millions are in bondage —the institutions are worn out—the government is selfish and corrupt—and the social system is rotten to its very core. True, we have enormous wealth in the country: but those who produce it are starving! True, we have all the outward and visible signs of a consummate prosperity: but it is the luxuriousness which prevailed at Rome on the eve of her downfall, and amongst the Moors of Grenada when the enemy was at their gates! The mocking edifice which fools and rogues call our Temple of Liberty, is built upon the bosom of pauperism, and is surrounded by the gibbet, the chain, the hulk, the treadmill, and the spies of the Law-Officers of the Crown. Oh! what can we think of an institution which re-

quires such sentinels and scarecrows to keep off those who will not content themselves with surveying it from the distance, but are venturesome enough to approach its walls in order to ascertain by close inspection whether it be really as solid, as faultless, and as beautiful as the lying tongues of sycophants, place-men, sinecurists, and pensioners have proclaimed it to be!

One word more upon this subject! In this country we have illimitable luxury for a few and a misery as boundless for the many—we have the most gorgeous palaces overlooking the filthiest hovels which the dwellers in those mansions would not have as styes for their pigs—we have the horses and dogs of the Royal Family better cared for, better lodged, and better fed than the human sons and daughters of toil—we have royal, aristocratic, and civic processions and festivals, where diamonds glitter like a galaxy of stars, while the countenances of the gazing multitudes are haggard with want, misery, and vice—we have families in whom vast estates are entailed, thus anticipating the property of the future, and others in whom appalling destitution is as certain a heritage, thus ensuring the sorrows of the future,—in fine, we have a pampered Aristocracy rolling in riches and revelling in luxury, and we have millions of honest, hard-working, meritorious people who are clothed in rags and can scarcely get a morsel of bread to eat!

Now, then, gentle reader—tell us, and tell us truly—is Great Britain free?—are Britons happy and prosperous?

And now to resume our tale.

We said that it was about seven o'clock in the evening; and the candles were lighted in the public room at the Beggar's Staff. A blazing fire roared half-way up the wide-mouth chimney; and the heat therefrom was increased by the vapour which steamed from fifty pipes, and which impregnated the stifling atmosphere with the sickly odour of tobacco. Within the bar stood Carrotty Pall, serving the customers and rigidly enforcing the rythmical injunction painted over the door leading into the parlour. Her appearance was more untidy and slattern-like than ever: her flaming red hair was in a disorder so complete that it resembled a bundle of tow and was as deficient in arrangement as a new mop;—and her gown was all open in front, displaying the scraggy neck and chest the skin of which resembled dirty tallow.

In her avocations she was assisted by the slipshod waiter of whom mention has been before made in our narrative: and whenever she had a moment's leisure, she passed into the little parlour, where she indulged in a whispered chat with some friend who was seated there, until the wants of the next customer called her forth again into the bar-enclosure.

Matters were progressing in the usual way at the Beggar's Staff on the special evening in question: that is to say, there was no deficiency of obscene jesting, coarse conversation, smutty songs, and savage quarrelling,—no deficiency either in coin to procure the alcoholic poison which makes depravity more depraved, vice more hardened, wantonness more brazen, and crime more desperate. In some cases the men were sitting with prostitutes upon their knees: in others, they were literally reclining in the arms of the loose women whose half-naked forms glowed ruddy in the lurid light of the fire·—while a few young girls of tender age were sitting together in a group, each apparently straining every effort and racking her invention to the utmost to talk in a style more libidinous and filthy than the rest.

While the inmates of the public room at the Beggar's Staff were thus diverting themselves after their own fashion, a man muffled up in a drab great coat and wearing an ample woollen comforter round his neck, entered the pandemonium. His hat was slouched over his eyes: he carried a short but stout ash stick in his hand;—and an ugly mongrel followed at his heels.

The moment this individual made his appearance, a sudden damp seemed to fall upon the company—for to the experienced eyes of the frequenters of the Beggar's Staff there was every indication of the Bow Street runner about that man. Nor was the conjecture erroneous; for as he walked in a free and easy fashion up to the bar, he pushed his hat somewhat back from over his face, and the well known features of Mr. Mobbs were immediately recognised not only by Carrotty Poll herself, but also by the greater portion of the company present.

"I don't come officially, my dear," he hastened to observe in a loud tone to the Big Beggarman's daughter: and the announcement instantaneously allayed the suddenly excited apprehensions of many whose consciences were not so clear but that they fancied it quite possible that they might be "wanted."

"Well, Mr. Mobbs, we're always glad to see you in a *friendly* way, you know," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, rendering her vixenish voice as soothing and her manner as cordial as she possibly could. "Perhaps you'll walk round," she added, after a few moments' pause, during which she knew that the person who was in the little parlour had retired into concealment.

"Thank'ee, Miss Price," said Mobbs, accepting the invitation. "I do want to have a word or two with you in private," he observed as he walked leisurely behind the counter and entered the snuggery.

"Wait one minute, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the red-haired young woman; "and I will be with you. Let me see—what spirits do you like? Oh! rum—I remember—so it is!" she added, taking down a bottle from the shelf;—and then, arming herself likewise with a jug of hot water, a tumbler, and a sugar-basin, she followed the dreaded individual into the little parlour.

"Shut the door, Miss, please," said Mobbs, as he snuffed the solitary tallow candle which burnt with a dim and sickly light even in that little place. "Have you heard from your father lately, Miss?"

"Well, that's a pretty question coming from a Bow Street Officer!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, affecting a jocose laugh, but in reality not much liking the query, inasmuch as she was instantly seized with the apprehension that her sire had been captured, and that Mobbs was come to break the tidings to her.

"'Pon my soul, I only made the remark out of politeness," said Mobbs, in a reassuring tone. "Of course I know your guv'ner is out of the way—and though I had a hand in taking him in the first instance, it was o'ny in the way of dooty and not through any disrespeck towards him. Quite t'other: for me and the Big Beggarman has had many a glass together——"

"Well, I'll tell you this much, Mr. Mobbs," interrupted Carrotty Poll, who was now satisfied that the man's visit to the Beggar's Staff did not regard her sire: "I know no more where my father is at this moment than you do—and I'm precious uneasy about him into the bargain. But what's brought you over to the Staff this evening?" she inquired, as she placed before Mobbs the reeking glass of rum-punch which she had just mixed for his special behoof.

"I've already told you it isn't official—nor more it is," responded the man, taking off his hat and comforter, and unbuttoning his drab coat: "but it's what may be called semi-official," he added, with a chuckle, as if he had given utterance to a very witty thing.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Mobbs," observed Carrotty Poll, again experiencing an uneasy sensation on account of the ambiguity of the fellow's remark.

"Well, what I mean is soon explained, Miss," rejoined Mobbs: "and the long and the short of the matter is that I'm no more a constable at this moment than you are, but that I've come here to see if I can obtain any clue to the unravelling of a partickler business so that I may get restored to my situation."

"Then you're suspended, Mr. Mobbs?" said Poll, inquiringly.

"Just so," was the answer: "and consekvently my visit is only half-official, as the saying is."

"Well, but what is the business about?" demanded the red-haired young woman, somewhat snappishly—for her courage came back, and with it a portion of her natural ill-temper, when she learnt that Mobbs was no longer dangerous nor terrible.

"The fact is," said this individual, "you've no doubt heard how a certain Caroline Walters gave me and Grumley the slip a week ago——"

"Yes—she jumped out of the window and drowned herself," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "At least, so we heard it reported in Horslydown."

"Well, the rumour was tolerably correct," continued Mobbs: "but ever since the very night of that occurrence Grumley has been missing in a most unaccountable manner—and so the magistrates naturally suspect that he's bolted on account of that affair."

"P'raps they don't believe the story of the young woman's leap from the window in order to commit suicide?" observed Carrotty Poll.

"You've just hit it, Miss," exclaimed Mobbs. "The disappearance of Grumley has thrown suspicion on the whole affair—and the authorities will have it that me and him was bribed to let the prisoner Caroline Walters escape. So I am suspended until such time as the matter can be cleared up saytisfactorily."

"But how do you hope to gain any clue at the Staff to your friend Grumley's proceedings?" demanded Carrotty Poll, with an acerbity which she scarcely took the trouble to conceal. "Remember, Mr. Mobbs, that *I* for one have no reason to be grateful either to you or Mr. Grumley for nabbing my father——"

"Quite in the way of business, my dear," interrupted Mobbs: "and remember that although I am suspended *now*, I may *soon* be restored to my post—and I shall not fail to mark them as treats me with incivility while I'm under the cloud."

"I'm sure I wouldn't treat you with incivility for the world, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, understanding the significancy and feeling the force of the implied menace. "But pray do tell me what information you hoped to obtain at the Staff?" she inquired, with renewed mildness of tone and manner.

"Why, to speak plain, Miss," said Mobbs, after a few moments' deep rumination, "I've been weighing in my mind this business of Grumley's sudden disappearance—and the longer I think of it, the more I'm convinced that he's made himself scarce for certain reasons——"

"Ah! I begin to understand," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, whose shrewdness enabled her to detect the rancour which was lurking at the bottom of the man's mind in respect to his late superior in office. "Mr. Grumley hasn't behaved well towards you in respect to your share of the proceeds of some transaction—pr'aps this very affair of Caroline Walters's *suicide*," she added, with a significant leer.

"Well, well," said Mobbs, laughing: "it's likely enough you ain't far wide of the mark, Miss."

"And so Grumley has really cheated you out of your regulars?" observed Carrotty Poll, in a musing tone. "I shouldn't have thought him capable of it."

"Neither did I," rejoined Mobbs. "But there's no saying what may happen in this world, or what a man may do. Howsomever, it's of no use to waste walyable time in idle observations; and so I'll just tell you at once what I want with you and why I come to the Staff to-night. That Grumley has made himself scarce, I'm pretty sure—and that he's got a large sum of money in his possession, there's no doubt. Now such a man won't leave London: I know his habits too well for that. He'll keep quiet till the affair about Caroline Walters has blowed over; and then he'll either manage to make his peace with the authorities, or else set up in business as a thief-catcher on his own account. But he shan't bilk me in no such a fashion; and therefore I'm resolved to ferret him out. If so be, then, you'll help me, I'll make it well worth your while: for I'll give you fifty guineas for any such information as may enable me to unkennel the old fox—and what's more, I'll take care that in future you shall always have a private hint conveyed to you when anything disagreeable turns up respecting the frequenters of the Staff. Now then, do you understand me?—and can we strike a bargain?"

"I think we may," replied Carrotty Poll. "And if any one in London can obtain a trace of Grumley's retreat, that person is myself—for there isn't a soul frequenting the Staff that won't be upon the look-out when I give the word."

"That's exactly what I thought," said Mobbs: "and as Grumley is very naturally detested by all your folks, they'll be glad to do him an ill turn."

"No doubt," observed Carrotty Poll. "But suppose he should return to Bow Street and make his peace with the authorities—won't he remember me for any evil office that I may have done him?"

"How should he know anythink about it?" demanded Mobbs. "Come, Miss Price—there's no need of being timid in the matter—as I mean fair-play on my part."

"But how am I to know, Mr. Mobbs," said Carrotty Poll, "that all this isn't some sly plant on your part—for some purpose or another——"

"Lord bless ye, my dear!" exclaimed the ill-looking fellow, endeavouring to appear as amiable as possible: "what objeck can I have to serve in all this, except the one I've explained to you? But to

convince you that I'm in earnest, and indeed to place myself somewhat in your power, I'll tell you openly and candidly at once that the whole business about Caroline Walters' leap from the winder *was* a put-up affair on the part of Grumley and me; and a certain fashionable milliner at the West End, whose name shall be nameless, was the person which instigated us to get the young gal off in some fashion or another. Well, we was to have five hundred guineas for the job: and as soon as it was done—indeed, on the wery night that the leap from the winder took place—Grumley called on the milliner aforesaid to receive the blunt. I went with him as far as the door of her house; and he said enough to let me know that he was raythor in love with her: for she's a wery handsome woman. Well, there we parted; and from that moment I've never clapt eyes on him again. Next morning I called on the lady—that is to say, the milliner—and she assured me he didn't remain with her above ten minutes or a quarter of an hour at the outside. She likewise told me that she had paid him the five hundred guineas; and she gave me fifty for myself. I then took my departure: and now, Miss Price, you see how matters stand and you will believe that I am in earnest in everythink I am saying or doing."

"Yes—I believe you now, Mr. Mobbs," answered Carrotty Poll: "but you will excuse me if I was rather suspicious at first?"

"Don't mention it, my dear," said Mobbs. "We have now come to an understanding together——"

At this moment the low door at the end of the little room was opened suddenly; and the Gallows' Widow made her appearance.

"I've overheard every syllable that has passed between you," she hastily exclaimed; "and I think I can add some important information to what *you* already know concerning your friend Grumley," she added, fixing her eyes upon Mobbs.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll. "Then you'll share the fifty guineas with me, Lizzy, if you earn them?"

"Yes—yes," said the Gallows' Widow: "I always act fair towards my pals."

"But what do you know about Grumley, Mrs. Marks?" inquired Mobbs, unable to restrain his impatience."

"I will tell you all in good time," returned the Gallows' Widow, now speaking without excitement and deliberately taking a chair at the table. "During the whole of your conversation, Mr. Mobbs, with Poll Price, I've been on the other side of that door; and therefore I have not lost a word of it. The fashionable milliner to whom you alluded, is Mrs. Brace of Pall Mall."

"Ah! you're indeed upon the scent—that's plain enough!" cried Mobbs. "Go on."

"On the same night when Grumley called upon Mrs. Brace, I paid her a visit also," proceeded the Gallows' Widow; "and I saw her and Grumley together."

"Is that possible, Lizzy?" exclaimed Carrotty Poll. "Why—you did not tell me anything about it?"

"I have only seen you twice since then," said the Gallows' Widow: "last Wednesday and to-night—and on neither occasion had we much time to chatter upon indifferent things."

"But didn't Grumley arrest you?" demanded Mobbs.

"To be sure he did," answered Elizabeth Marks: "and Mrs. Brace made a compromise with him to get me off. In a word, Grumley imposed his own conditions—and she consented."

"What was the conditions?" inquired Mobbs.

"Fifty guineas in cash and a share of Mrs. Brace's bed for the night," was the startling response.

"By jingo!" ejaculated Mobbs, a sudden reminiscence striking him: "I now recollect that when I called upon the milliner, she seemed very much excited and confused—and I fancied she had been drinking."

"But did you observe of what nature was the confusion she exhibited?" inquired the Gallows' Widow, her manner suddenly becoming profoundly mysterious. "Because there is an embarrassment arising from shame, and another from guilt: a man of your profession, Mr. Mobbs, ought to know the difference."

"Well, now—you've excited strange ideas in my head," observed Mobbs, in a reflective tone; "and I do remember that Mrs. Brace's manner was uncommonly suspicious. And the more I think of it, the more it reminds me of the way in which a woman looked and spoke when I went to take her up on suspicion of murdering her husband some years ago."

"Ah! then Mrs. Brace looked and spoke like a murderess—did she?" said the Gallows' Widow, her usually tranquil voice now expressing a fiendish malignity.

"You know more than you choose to admit, Mrs. Marks," exclaimed Mobbs. "But, by jingo! if such a thing has really taken place——"

"What thing?" demanded the Gallows' Widow.

"Why—that Grumley has been murdered," replied Mobbs: "and now I have put into the shape of language the suspicion which you have excited in my mind."

"And you have fully caught the meaning which I intended to convey," said the Gallows' Widow. "For how stands the matter? The last trace which we at present possess of Peter Grumley, leaves him at midnight in Mrs. Brace's house. He has never been seen or heard of afterwards. It is quite clear that he did not intend to make himself scarce at that time: because if he had entertained such a notion, he would not have arrested me. But that he had been making love to Mrs. Brace before I called, was clear enough from what he said when he imposed upon her the conditions of that compromise in virtue of which I was suffered to depart scot free: and from all I observed, it was equally clear that she viewed with horror and loathing the prospect of submitting to the embraces of such a many. You must also reflect that she had that same night paid this very man five hundred and fifty guineas: and now what aspect does the whole affair assume?"

"Why, that the milliner had every inducement possible to make away with Grumley," answered Mobbs,—"not only to get back her money, but likewise to rid herself of the necessity of admitting him to her bed."

"Such is my idea!" exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, with the excitement of a malignant triumph: then between her teeth she muttered, "Now, Mrs. Brace, I will be avenged upon you for the contempt and scorn with which you treated me the other night!"

And in the little parlour behind the bar of the Beggar's Staff did Mobbs remain until a late hour in consultation with the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll.

CHAPTER CXLI.

RAO AT EARL MONTGOMERY'S MANSION.

It was nine o'clock in the evening as Rao, Lord Florimel's black page, rang the servants' bell of a handsome house in Grafton Street. A liveried lacquey soon responded to the summons; and the sable youth was forthwith conducted into the presence of Lord Montgomery.

This nobleman was seated in a handsomely-furnished parlour with a bay-window; and an open door afforded a view of a smaller room adjoining. Both apartments contained some very fine paintings set in magnificent frames. The subjects were chiefly landscapes; and amongst them there was one representing a charming piece of true English scenery—a picturesque village with its ivy-covered church-tower.

Lord Montgomery was reading a book while he sipped his claret, when the black menial was shown into his presence. Laying aside the volume, and stretching out his legs before the fire with an air of indifference, his lordship said, "Well, my boy—you have something to tell me, have you not?"

"Oh! if the object of my presence here be so very trivial and unimportant," exclaimed Rao, in a tone expressive of a dignity cruelly mortified, "I may as well depart at once. Good evening, my lord:"—and the page glided towards the door.

"Stop, you wayward boy!" cried Montgomery. "By heaven! you are prompt to take offence——"

"Yes—even as I am ready to render a service," rejoined the lad, with a marked significancy: and turning round, he again approached the nobleman.

"Singular being!" ejaculated the latter: "are you more or less than you seem? Surely you were not bred and born to be the lacquey of an Englishman? There is a grace in your movements—an elegance in your attitudes—a perfect accuracy in your speech—a gentility in your manners——"

"Enough of flattery, my lord!" exclaimed Rao, sharply. "Who and what I am, matters not to you: and if you suspect that I am not what I appear, you will keep your own counsel in that respect, because I am prepared to render you a service of a nature which will lay you under no small obligation towards me!"

"Sit down, Rao—sit down," said Lord Montgomery, well convinced that the boy was indeed something more than he appeared and that the lacquey's livery suited not well his real condition, however elegantly it might become his slight and graceful figure. "Now will you take a glass of wine?"

"I thank your lordship," responded the page; "but my favourite beverage is water. And now you will permit me at once to open the discourse upon the topic which it is destined to take, inasmuch as I dare not remain too long absent from Piccadilly."

"Proceed," said Lord Montgomery, the first feeling of prejudice and dislike which he had entertained towards the page, having already changed into one of sympathy and interest.

"Your lordship intends to be present at the masquerade which is to take place at Covent Garden to-morrow night?" said Rao, fixing his dark eyes with a peculiar keenness upon the nobleman's countenance.

"Yes—such is my intention," was the reply.

"And your lordship would fain personate my master, Lord Florimel?" continued Rao, in the same precise tone and positive manner which seemed to show that he was describing those thoughts which he had fathomed, and was not hazarding interrogative conjectures.

"Well—I am not audacious enough to deny the truth of your surmise," said Lord Montgomery.

"Surmise!" echoed the boy, in a contemptuous tone. "Think you, my lord, that I cannot read your hidden soul as plainly as the printed page of a book? Yes—I have penetrated all your thoughts and wishes in respect to that masquerade—aye, and I have read all the hopes which the narrative of Lord Florimel's romantic adventure has excited within you."

"Then you played the eaves-dropper, Rao, when your master was telling me that strange story?" exclaimed Earl Montgomery.

"Yes—I have read all your secret wishes and all your fervent hopes, my lord," resumed the boy, without heeding the remark which the nobleman had just made and which proclaimed an accusation that he would doubtless have denied if he could.

At this instant the door was opened, and a servant entered the room. Rao started to his feet, evidently to save Lord Montgomery from any suspicion or misconstruction that might arise from the fact of his being found familiarly seated with a liveried page: and the nobleman threw at the boy a rapid glance expressive of his thanks for this proof of good taste on his part.

"Please your lordship," said the domestic who had just entered the room, "Mr. Rigden requests an immediate interview. He has only one word to say, and will not detain your lordship a minute."

"Show him in," returned Montgomery: then observing the page, whose presence he had at the instant forgotten, he said, "Step into the adjacent room, my boy, while I say a few words to my solicitor. It is not worth the trouble to make you step out into the hall for the short period that we shall be engaged together."

This proceeding on the Earl's part was another phase of that tacit respect with which he was inspired towards Rao by the belief that he was something more than he seemed—an idea that forbade the nobleman from treating the boy as a mere lacquey. And Rao understood the considerate feeling which was thus manifested towards him: for even as he glided into the adjoining room, he looked back to express his grateful appreciation thereof with a rapid, fervent glance.

The sable page closed the door behind him; and at the same moment Mr. Rigden was ushered into the presence of Lord Montgomery.

The attorney was a middle-aged man, with a pale face and keen gray eyes. He was dressed in black, wore a white cravat and ample shirt frill, and was altogether very precise in his personal appearance. He took snuff: but he managed the habit in so cleanly a manner that his linen never betrayed it even by a single grain of the pulverised weed. His bearing was naturally cold, reserved, and distant: he never spoke hastily, and scarcely ever betrayed

an emotion—much less a feeling of excitement;—in fine, he was one of those shrewd, cautious, and even mistrustful men who never take a step without looking well where they are about to tread, and never give utterance to a word without having deliberately weighed it in all its probable or possible bearings.

"Well, Rigden," said Lord Montgomery, rising to proffer his hand to the lawyer, while the domestic who had introduced him retired immediately from the apartment: "what news? Has anything unpleasant happened?"

"Nothing unpleasant," answered the attorney, abandoning the tips of two fingers to the nobleman's grasp—for he himself hated shaking hands and all similar proofs of friendship or social amenity. "Just as I was leaving my office this evening I received a certain notice from the Court; and I thought that as I was compelled to visit your neighbourhood at about nine, I would call and communicate the circumstances to your lordship."

"And what is the notice about?" demanded Montgomery, literally trembling with feverish impatience.

"The notice, my lord," said Mr. Rigden, taking out his gold snuff-box and deliberately indulging in a pinch of its contents, "is from the Court of Chancery, and is to the effect that the Master's final report will be delivered in on Saturday next in the several matters of 'Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' 'Raymond Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' and 'Aylmer *versus* Bellenden.'"

"On Saturday next?" repeated the nobleman, with the air of one who trembled at the close proximity of an event to which he had nevertheless been looking forward with so much anxiety.

"Yes—on Saturday next," said Mr. Rigden.

"Then all the fresh evidence has been put in?" continued Montgomery in a tone of anxious inquiry: "all the important and very remarkable testimony which I have procured from the country within the last few weeks?"

"It is all before the Master, my lord," replied Mr. Rigden.

"Come, now—do throw off this hyperborean chill—this more than professional reserve," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, "and tell me candidly and as a friend whether you feel convinced that the decrees will be in our favour."

"Nothing, my lord, is certain in this world," responded the attorney, taking another pinch of snuff, and leaning forward in such a manner that not a grain should alight upon his snowy shirt-frill: "and of all uncertain things the results of Chancery suits are the most incalculable," he added.

"But the evidence I procured the other day," insisted Lord Montgomery, "must prove overwhelming?"

"It will have its weight, my lord," said the attorney. "By the bye, your brother Lord Raymond Montgomery should be in London in the course of the week, as his presence is indispensible. You remember how singular is that clause of your ancestor's will under which he claims the Warwickshire estates——"

"Indeed, I can scarcely have forgotten a single syllable of a testamentary provision so vitally important to our family interests," observed Lord Montgomery. "But I will write to my brother to-morrow," he added hastily: "and I will urge him to come up to town without delay. I have not heard from him, nor indeed of him, for some weeks past——"

"His melancholy disposition leads him to seek the retirement of a rural existence," observed the attorney. "But does his lordship still feel as much as ever that disappointment which his heart's affections experienced? And, by the bye—when I think of it—the marriage of Miss Aylmer to Mr. Clarendon, now Lord Holderness, must have been a sad blow to your unhappy brother, inasmuch as it destroyed the last hope which he could possibly have cherished——"

"Yes—he no doubt loved Fernanda very dearly," observed Lord Montgomery, with a certain hastiness, amounting almost to a pettishness of manner—as if he either disliked the subject, or thought it irrelevant at that moment. "I suppose that now the Master's report is ready, judgment will be delivered very shortly?"

"We have every reason to hope so, my lord," returned Mr. Rigden. "But in case your lordship should forget to write to Lord Raymond to-morrow, I will myself communicate with him. I presume a letter will reach him at Malden Farm?"

"He was there when I heard of him last," responded Earl Montgomery. "You had better write to him yourself: it will be more regular."

"I shall assuredly do so," said the attorney, taking another pinch of snuff. "And now, before I leave your lordship," he continued, a thought striking him, "I should wish to ask a certain question respecting a noble acquaintance of yours—and yet I scarcely know how to take such a liberty——"

"Do not hesitate, Mr. Rigden," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "If I can serve you in any manner, I shall be delighted. To whom of my noble acquaintances do you allude?"

"To Lord Florimel," answered the attorney. "But lest the question which I am desirous to ask your lordship should appear impertinent, I will explain in a few words my motives in putting it. The fact is that this very morning a noble client of mine introduced to me a young man who has suddenly and strangely discovered certain grounds and reasons for supposing that he has claims of an extraordinary nature which would materially affect the fortune and the social position of Lord Florimel; and I must frankly confess that as far as I was enabled to look into the matter at the moment it was presented to me, the young man's claims appear to be well worth a law-suit. At the same time, I have no doubt that he would listen to any reasonable terms for an amicable settlement without the intervention of the tribunals; and to this course I should recommend him to accede. The question, therefore, that I was desirous to ask your lordship, is whether Lord Florimel is a man likely to treat the affair in a friendly way if it be submitted to him in the same spirit—or whether he is one of those obstinate individuals who, believing that possession is worth nine points of the law, will plunge headlong into Chancery with a neck or nothing determination."

"I should say that Lord Florimel will listen to reason," answered Montgomery. "But I am sorry to hear that he is menaced in so serious a manner—and I am pretty sure that he suspects nothing of the

kind: for I was with him this morning for a couple of hours, and we were conversing in a most familiar strain upon many topics of a private nature."

"No—he at present entertains not the slightest idea of the storm which is brewing," observed Rigden: "and I must beg your lordship, as a particular favour, not to mention a word upon the subject until he shall first broach it to you. For it was in a pure friendly spirit that I put such a question to you just now; and I repeat, that my advice will be to the effect of a private compromise instead of an appeal to the Law Courts."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask who is the claimant and what is the nature of his claims against Lord Florimel?" said Montgomery. "I pledge you my honour that not a syllable of anything you may communicate shall pass my lips——"

"My lord, I cannot mention the name of the claimant," said the lawyer, "because the matter is as yet entirely in its infancy. But this much I have no objection to state, that the claims advanced are of the most sweeping and extensive nature—not only striking at the possessions of Lord Florimel, but even at his very right to the peerage itself."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Montgomery: "you astonish me! And yet it was but this very morning that Lord Florimel happened to mention to me in the course of conversation that he was in possession of all the deeds and documents regarding his estates."

"Ah! he told your lordship *that*—did he?" said Mr. Rigden, taking a pinch of snuff. "Then all I can now add is that the piece of information you have just given me has quite set at rest one portion of the matter of which I have been speaking: for the claims of the young man to the Florimel estates are founded upon a belief that no regular deeds conferring a title upon the present holder are in existence."

"Then I am glad you have mentioned the affair to me, my dear Rigden," exclaimed Montgomery: "for I can assure you that Florimel not only possesses his deeds and parchments, but has even told me where he keeps them."

"In that case, as I said before, one part of the business is set at rest," observed the lawyer. "The only claim now remaining regards the peerage—and that point cannot be worth disputing, inasmuch as a mere empty title would be a burthen instead of an honour to a penniless man. So, after all, I think that Lord Florimel is quite safe—and I return your lordship many thanks for the information you have given me. Good evening, my lord."

"Will you not step up stairs to the drawing-room and inform my mother of the notice you have received from the Chancery Court?" inquired Montgomery. "The Countess is all alone this evening——"

"I will do myself the honour of waiting upon her," said Rigden;—and, with a ceremonious bow, he quitted the apartment.

At the same moment that the door closed behind him, the remembrance that the black page was in the adjoining room flashed to the brain of Lord Montgomery, who had altogether forgotten the circumstance during the interview with the lawyer.

"Perdition!" muttered the nobleman to himself, as he recollected the eaves-dropping propensities of the sable page: but he was almost instantaneously reassured by the thought that nothing had passed with the lawyer touching his own family affairs that he could care about the boy overhearing, while all that had been said respecting Lord Florimel was of very inferior importance.

Throwing open the door of communication between the two apartments, the nobleman was about to call Rao by name, when he caught sight of the boy reclining in a large arm-chair and apparently wrapped in the profoundest repose. Montgomery advanced into the inner room, where a light was also burning as well as in the other; and the door, escaping from his hand, closed with some degree of violence. Rao started up—rubbed his eyes—and in a few moments seemed to recollect where he was.

"I humbly beg your lordship's pardon," he said, "for having so far forgotten myself as to fall asleep. But is it late?" he demanded with a sudden anxiety.

"A quarter to ten," answered Montgomery, referring to his watch. "That cursed lawyer came for a minute and stayed half-an-hour."

"And I will not detain your lordship one-tenth of that time," said Rao. "To sum up, therefore, all I have said or was about to say, I will at once observe that as your lordship intends to go to the masquerade to-morrow night, you will do well to accept the loan of a domino which I will leave with your lordship's valet in the course of the day."

"Ah! I understand you full well, Rao," exclaimed the Earl: "your master's commands have been disobeyed—and you have not destroyed the blue domino."

The black page smiled with an arch significancy—but made no reply.

"And yet," observed Montgomery, "I cannot conceive wherefore you should have shown so much anxiety not only to fathom my desires, but also to gratify them?"

"Simply because I am fond of amusing myself in a particular manner," said Rao: "and the sort of amusement which I like is what you English people call *mischief*."

"Yes—I have heard that East Indians are apt to be as mischievous as monkeys," observed the nobleman, laughing: "and now I have received a proof of it. Well, my good boy, I accept your offer—and I will wear the domino. But of course this is a secret between you and me."

"I am not likely to reveal it," said Rao, laconically.

"And I pledge you my word that I will not," returned the nobleman: then, after a few moments' hesitation, he said, "But tell me how I can reward you for this service which you are rendering me—for I scarcely know by what means to testify my sense of your kindness."

"I require nothing at present, my lord," answered Rao. "Should I ever need a boon at your hands, I shall come and ask it."

"And most cheerfully shall I grant your request, if it be in my power to do so," said the Earl.

The black page bowed a slight but graceful acknowledgment of the pledge thus given, and then took his departure—gliding away from the nobleman's presence like a shadow.

"There is something incomprehensibly mysterious about that boy!" said Lord Montgomery to himself, as he returned to his seat in the front room.

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CHAPTER CXLII.

THE MASQUERADE.—SCENE THE FIRST.

FAITHFUL to his promise, the black page delivered the braided domino at Lord Montgomery's house in Grafton Street, on the morning following the incidents just related; and at about ten o'clock in the evening, the nobleman alighted from a plain carriage at the entrance to Covent Garden Theatre.

He was enveloped in the domino, the hood of which was drawn almost entirely over his head: and in addition to this precaution, he wore a mask. It was thus impossible to obtain the slightest glimpse of his countenance, while through the holes of the mask his eyes commanded a perfect view of the brilliant scene into the midst of which he now entered.

The only circumstance which made him fear that the trick would prove a failure and that he could not succeed in passing himself off as Lord Florimel, was the difference in their stature: for although Montgomery was only of the middle height, yet Florimel was shorter still—and there was a probability that the keen observation of a woman would notice this fact. However, Montgomery regarded the adventure as one well worth the trial; and he had already made up his mind to play his part with the utmost caution, tact, and circumspection, in case he should really be accosted by some disguised beauty.

The interior of Covent Garden Theatre presented a scene of the most dazzling brilliancy. The pit was completely boarded over, so that a floor was formed to meet the stage; and at the end of the stage itself a full band was placed, under the direction of a celebrated leader. The arena was crowded with masques, displaying every variety of costume, every singularity of fancy-dress, and every artifice to ensure complete

disguise;—and the boxes were thronged with occupants, some in masquerade attire, and others in ball-dresses. The magnificent crystal chandeliers suspended to the ceiling and the candelabra projecting from around the tiers of boxes, flooded the vast interior of the building with an also overpowering lustre—so that everything was penetrated as it were with light, and the countless beings gathered there moved about like butterflies and gorgeous insects in the noon-day sun.

The music was playing—and the body of harmony, with its variations of sweetness and grandeur, pathos and excitement, seemed to fill every part of the theatre. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—the murmuring of soft voices formed an undercurrent of sound dominated by the superior swell of the superb music — and the eye of the beholder wandered with ineffable delight over the fairy scene.

Lord Montgomery walked slowly round the arena, keeping close to the lowest tier of boxes in order that he might command a view of all the disguised forms, male or female, that were moving about upon that elastic floor: then he mingled in the crowd itself, exchanging jests with some and provoking witty repartees from others—but still without attracting the special notice of any particular lady.

At length, retiring from the thickest of the crowd and posting himself near the musicians, he began to scrutinise in detail all the female masques who seemed to be invested with any degree of interest.

But scarcely had he stationed himself in that spot which appeared so convenient for his survey, when an elegant female, dressed as a flower-girl, passed rapidly by him; and from behind the black satin mask which covered her countenance, she darted upon him a look that seemed intended to pierce through his disguise, impenetrable though it really were.

Montgomery followed her with his eyes as she plunged into the midst of the crowd;—and he saw enough of her to excite the liveliest interest in his soul. She was tall in stature; and her exquisitely-modelled form appeared to be almost visible through the picturesque attire which she wore—so admirably was it fitted to her shape and so well did it develop the fluent and rounded proportions of those very contours which it concealed. The short petticoats displayed the sculptured delicacy of the feet and ankles and the robust swell of the legs; and on one of the white and beauteously moulded arms, which were bare, hung a basket of artificial flowers. Her hair was of a rich dark brown; and as much of the neck, throat, and bosom as met the eye of the beholder, was of a dazzling whiteness. Nothing, in fine, could exceed the purity of that polished skin—nothing could be more charming than that snowy complexion which belonged to flesh evidently plump and warm with the vigorous health of youth.

Montgomery was so struck by her appearance and so ravished by the graces of her person, that he would have staked his soul upon the belief that her countenance was of a corresponding beauty. So lost in rapture was he that he seemed transfixed to the spot; and when he thought of following her, it was too late—she had disappeared amidst the thickest of the multitude of masques. But it instantaneously struck him that this must be the lady who had sent the domino and who expected to meet Lord Florimel beneath that disguise;—and then, recollecting how keen was the glance which she threw upon him and how precipitate was the immediate retreat, he said to himself, "The adventure is a failure! She saw that mine was not the stature of Lord Florimel—and she has departed in mingled rage and disappointment!"

But scarcely had he made this reflection, when he was startled with a thrill of ecstatic feeling that passed like an electric shock through his entire frame, on beholding the graceful Flower Girl once more issue from the crowd and approach the spot where he was standing. Her pace was now slow and her step somewhat hesitating; and even from behind that mask which formed so impervious a veil to conceal any confusion which she might have experienced, did she evidently send forth agitated glances. But the soft and graceful balancing of her gait—the floating elegance of her form—and the seductive charm of all her movements, rivetted the attention of Lord Montgomery; and he thought within himself that if this lady should indeed prove the heroine of the present adventure, no effort that he could possibly make to possess her ought to be spared. For to his memory rushed all the glowing descriptions which Florimel had given him of that night of mystery, love, and voluptuousness,—those four hours of frenzied bliss, thrilling ecstacies, and burning kisses; and Montgomery said to himself, "My God! if this be the woman whose amorous proficiency plunged Florimel into a never-to-be-forgotten paradise, I would sooner lose my own soul to Satan than the chance of enjoying the mingled intoxication and delirium of her warm embraces and furious caresses."

And while these reflections swept through the brain of Earl Montgomery, the Flower Girl—for so must we denominate the charming unknown—was still advancing towards him;—while he remained motionless as a statue, but devouring her with the ardent looks which he threw upon her from behind his mask. For as yet he could not be sure that she was purposely accosting him—nor was it an unmistakable certainty that he was indeed an object of attention or interest on her part. She might be moving in that direction in the abstraction of her thoughts—or she might believe him to be some one for whom she was looking, and yet not have in view the aims which he hoped and suspected.

While he was making these additional reflections, she approached within three yards of the spot where he was standing: then she passed him by at a pace so slow as to convince him that she was only seeking the leisure and the opportunity to contemplate him with attention—for her eyes, shining like twin-diamonds through the mask, remained fixed upon him the whole time.

"Yes — she *is* the lady of this adventure," thought Montgomery within himself. "She recognises the domino—but she hesitates because I am taller than Florimel. Would that I were of a stature as feminine as his!"

The Flower Girl passed by the nobleman and advanced as far as the music-stands at the extremity of the stage: then turning abruptly round, she again approached him, slackening her pace as she drew nearer towards the spot where he still stood motionless. It struck him that he would speak to her: but he was afraid that he could not sufficiently imitate Florimel's voice in order to deceive her—and he saw the monstrous imprudence

of doing anything to strengthen the suspicion with which she already appeared to view him.

Again she passed him by—closer this time than before;—and he could even catch the bright and searching looks which she fixed upon him. Yes—and he heard, too, the subdued sigh which came from her bosom, and which seemed to torture her with a suffocating effect.

The impulse which now seized upon him was irresistible: and stepping forward, he took her hand, saying in a low whisper, "Beauteous lady, wherefore are you unhappy?"

For an instant he felt her hand tremble even through the white kid glove which covered it: the next moment that hand was snatched back with a strange abruptness—and her looks appeared to flash through her mask, as she said in a tone that was musically fluid though evidently feigned, "Who are you?"

"I am *Lord Florimel* to the world—*Gabriel* to you, sweet lady, whoever you may be," was the response delivered by Montgomery, in a key so soft and low that it was impossible it could either confirm or lull a suspicion as to whose voice it really was.

"You are Lord Florimel?" said the Flower-Girl, her own voice now sounding so tremulously as to be scarcely audible—and the Earl could perceive that her entire frame writhed as if with a sudden convulsion, but whether of frenzied joy or searching anguish he could not at the instant conjecture: for that abrupt vibration so much resembled the spasm of a bitter affliction—and yet what other feeling could influence her save a thrill of ecstacy?

"Yes—I am Lord Florimel," repeated Montgomery, still rendering his voice utterly impossible to be recognised: "and you, dearest lady——"

"Traitor!—perjurer!" murmured the unknown, in a dying voice—and she appeared suddenly to stagger as if about to fall.

Montgomery, though struck with dismay at the tremendous epithets which had just been hurled at his head, stretched out his arms to save her: but this movement on his part seemed to recall her to herself in an instant—and repelling his attentions with an evident mingling of hatred and scorn, she darted away—glided with the aerial lightness of a Bayadere amidst the crowd—and was lost to his view.

"Damnation!" murmured Lord Montgomery to himself: "the adventure is spoilt—the trick is discovered—the game is lost! She perceived that I was *not* Lord Florimel: and as it was Lord Florimel—and Lord Florimel only—whom she was resolved to have, no substitute would answer her purpose. But what on earth did she mean by calling me a *a perjurer?* The word '*traitor*,' is intelligible enough—for it is doubtless a treacherous act to personate one's friend in a love-intrigue of so delicate a nature as this. But perjurer—perjurer—how can I be a perjurer? Perhaps she meant that I was the traitor and Florimel the perjurer: and yet he assured me that she never bound him by any oath or pledge at all. Be that, however, as it will—it is not the less annoying to experience so signal a failure in an enterprise which promised to be of so delicious a piquancy. She must assuredly be a splendid creature! What a glorious complexion—what admirably-moulded arms—what a superb length of limb—and what an elegant figure! Then the bust—just ample enough to be voluptuous—and yet appearing to possess a virginal plumpness and firmness! Albeit she is no virgin, if Florimel's tale be true: and who can doubt it? Still there is about this charming being a certain maiden freshness and all that wholesome flush of youthfulness which do not bespeak a long nor an intimate acquaintance with amorous pursuits and exciting pleasures. Oh! it is enough to drive me mad with rage and disappointment, to think that I should have lost so golden an opportunity! But I may yet make my peace with her—it is not perhaps too late—and who knows what may be the result? I will plead the strength of a passion excited almost to delirium by the tale which Lord Florimel narrated;—and I will reveal the whole truth—who I am—and by what stratagem I hoped to take the place of the young noble whose puritanical devotion to his Pauline would not permit him to plunge into this intrigue! Yes—let me seek the mysterious Flower Girl—and all will yet be well!"

With this last reflection still traversing his brain, Lord Montgomery hastened in search of the disguised lady who had already excited so deep an interest in his heart.

CHAPTER CXLIII.

THE MASQUERADE.—SCENE THE SECOND.

We must now inform the reader of a circumstance which we did not choose to interrupt our narrative to relate before. This was, that while the Flower Girl was timidly hovering about the spot where Lord Montgomery had been posted, in the manner already related, her movements were observed and keenly though cautiously watched by two individuals in masquerade costume.

One was a tall and somewhat portly man, of fine proportions and robust symmetry. He was attired in a Turkish garb remarkable for the richness of its material and the elegance of its ornaments; and his countenance was carefully concealed by a black satin mask.

His companion, who was of shorter stature, was dressed in a black domino, and likewise wore a mask.

These two persons had entered the theatre almost at the same time as the Flower Girl; and as the Turk was immediately struck by the winning grace and seductive elegance of her appearance, concealed though her features were, he had followed her amidst the mazes of the crowd—though at such a distance as to avoid exciting her suspicions. His companion in the black domino kept constantly a few paces in the rear; and whenever the Turk addressed a word to him, he received the communication with the profound deference of an inferior.

From the first moment, we say, that they had caught sight of the Flower Girl, they had watched her motions, in order to ascertain whether she was altogether alone, or whether she had an appointment with some one for whom she was searching. They had seen her approach Lord Montgomery in the first instance—they had observed the scrutinizing look which she threw upon him—and they had marked the rapidity with which she turned back and plunged again into the crowd. Then they followed her at a distance; and they perceived

that she was evidently hastening away from the brilliant scene, probably with a view of quitting it altogether; and the Turk was already pressing forward to introduce himself to her notice, when she suddenly stopped short as if some new idea had struck her—and the next moment she was retracing her way through the busy throng of masques, towards the spot where the Blue Domino (Lord Montgomery) was still standing.

The Turk and the Black Domino likewise altered their course, still bending their steps in the track of that being whose form possessed so many captivating graces as to impress upon the mind the conviction that her face must be of a corresponding loveliness.

But this time she approached the Blue Domino with a slower and more timid step—and while she was thus accosting Montgomery in the manner and with the result already described, the Turk and the Black Domino were intently observing her proceedings from the opposite side of the stage.

"By the living God, Germain," said the Turk, suddenly clutching his companion by the arm, "I never was so enchanted by the elegance, the symmetry, and the grace of a woman's form, as I am at this moment! Such a creature must possess the countenance of a divinity."

"Her complexion is certainly charming, your Royal Highness," was the response given by the Black Domino.

"Her complexion!" ejaculated the Prince of Wales, who was disguised in the Turkish garb: "is that all you notice with regard to her? Look at her figure—it is as finely proportioned as that of poor Octavia Clarendon. Then her foot and ankle—and the symmetry of her leg——Oh! Germain, I must and will possess her—and 'tis for you to manage the affair for me in some way or another."

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured that if it be possible," said Germain, "this matter shall terminate according to your wishes."

"But what extraordinary coquetry is this which she is practising towards that Blue Domino?" exclaimed the Prince, aside to his faithful dependant. "Look how timidly and bashfully she hovers round him—while he does not move an inch! Surely it is some statue that is perched up there—and not a being of warm flesh and blood: else never would he remain thus apathetic while so heavenly a creature is endeavouring to win his attention."

"Your Royal Highness will pardon me," said Germain; "but he is evidently contemplating her through his mask with an absorbing interest. My opinion is that each one has got a particular appointment and that neither is convinced that the other is the person expected."

"Yes—it must be something of that sort, Germain," observed the Prince; "and the misunderstanding or uncertainty becomes every instant more embarrassing. The Blue Domino remains stationary—the Flower Girl advances timidly—and now she passes him by—and they do not speak! But this is extraordinary, Germain—and I have a very great mind to accost the fair one and propose myself as her companion——"

"Your Royal Highness may spoil all by so precipitate a course," said Germain. "Let us see the result of this curious dumb-show and bye-play, and be led by circumstances."

"And if the unknown charmer should find her expected *beau* either in that Blue Domino or in some similar masque?" said the Prince.

"Then it will be difficult to bring matters to the issue desired by your Royal Highness," returned Germain. "But an idea has just struck me, may it please——"

"Well—what is this idea?" demanded the Prince.

"That there is no appointment at all on the part of this lady," answered the valet; "but that she is a jealous wife or mistress, on the look out for a faithless husband or a perfidious lover."

"Egad! the idea is not a bad one, Germain," exclaimed his Royal Highness. "But what is she doing now? She advances as far as the musicians—she turns abruptly—she retraces her way—Ah! and now they speak——"

"And there is evidently nothing cordial between them, your Royal Highness," observed Germain.

"Upon my word, I am not sure," said the Prince: "he takes her hand——"

"And now she repulses him," added Germain. "Ah! the interview is over—there is some disagreeable discovery——"

"Or else some very embarrassing mistake," observed the Prince. "But away she goes—we must follow her—and if she should leave the theatre and take a hackney-coach or a cab, Germain——"

"I understand what to do, your Royal Highness," said the astute valet, as he followed his master in pursuit of the Flower Girl.

But here we must take leave of the Prince of Wales and Germain for the present, and return to Lord Montgomery, whom we likewise left hastening after that same mysterious lady.

Cursing his folly for having allowed a single moment to elapse ere he sped in chase of the enchanting creature, he was actually forcing his way through the crowd of masques, when a gentle hand caught him by one of the folds of his domino, and a voice of musical softness said in a tone of timid inquiry, "Lord Florimel?"

Montgomery stopped instantaneously, but gave no immediate answer. For this circumstance threw him all in a moment into an unspeakable bewilderment;—inasmuch as the masque who had thus accosted him was a lady of fine figure, and habited as a Circassian Slave.

Were there, then, *two* heroines in the present adventure?—were *two* fair ones in the secret of the overture made to Lord Florimel by means of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino? Or was there some grand mistake somewhere?—and if so, which was the legitimate and real heroine—the Flower Girl or the Circassian Slave?

Swift as the shadow of a flight of birds passes over a field when the sun is shining brightly, did these thoughts traverse the brain of Earl Montgomery;—and with the same rapidity did his eyes sweep the form of the lady who had accosted him.

And what was the result of this survey? He observed that she was quite as tall as the Flower Girl and somewhat stouter; indeed, that she possessed the *embonpoint* of a woman of riper age, and whose charms have acquired the luxuriant voluptuousness of maturity in place of the first freshness of youth. He noticed, therefore, that her bosom was of large proportions, but still preserving a firmness unmarred by its fulness; and that at all events it was of the purest virginal whiteness. Her shoulders were well

filled out—slightly rounded—and beautifully sloping;—and her waist was of a symmetry properly consistent with the amplitude of this magnificent bust and the large projection of the hips. Her arms were of sculptural massiveness, but admirably moulded—round, plump, and of dazzling whiteness;—and her hands were perfectly ravishing with their long taper fingers and their pellucid almond-shaped nails. Her feet and ankles were of corresponding beauty;—and altogether her form, from the throat to the sole of the foot, was of a splendour and a voluptuousness which denoted a woman grandly handsome and fervently impassioned. For who could doubt that the black silk mask concealed a face whose features were in perfect keeping with the richness of contour, the fineness of proportion, and the elegance of figure which we have endeavoured to describe?

Lord Montgomery's eyes, in sweeping over the lady's person, embraced at a glance all that we have taken some minutes to delineate.

"Yes—I am Lord Florimel," he said at length, and with a voice as effectually disguised as when he exchanged those brief and rapid observations with the Flower Girl. "And are you, lady, that same adorable but mysterious creature who fifteen months ago——"

"Hush, my lord--hush!" murmured the Circassian Slave, although Montgomery was speaking only in a whisper. "You remember the promise which I then made you——"

"Yes—that we should meet again, dear lady," continued the Earl: "but an age has elapsed since then—and I began to fear that the pledge on your part would be never kept."

"Then you have wished to meet me again, Gabriel?" said the lady, in a voice trembling with ineffable emotions; and she walked slowly aside with Earl Montgomery as she thus spoke.

"Oh! how can you ask me, adorable creature?" exclaimed the nobleman, who remembered, as his looks now dwelt devouringly upon her superb form, all that Florimel had told him of the impassioned ardour and frenetic desires which animated the heroine of his four hours' enjoyment: and the Earl felt his own imagination already wandering amidst those elysian blisses which had been so faithfully described to him, and of which the mysterious being now by his side was at the time alike the creatress and the partaker.

"I ask you whether you wished to meet me again, Gabriel," said the lady, in reply to his own ejaculatory observation,—"because it is sweet to receive such an assurance—and because I must learn, ere we proceed farther in the renewal of our amour, whether you are prepared to be as docile, submissive, and obedient to all I shall suggest or require, as you were upon the former occasion?"

"Dearest lady, do you imagine that by word or deed on my part I would forfeit the bliss which is derived from your society?" asked Lord Montgomery, still speaking in a low and assumed tone: and it struck him that through the holes in the lady's mask came burning looks vibrating with desire.

Then, as from behind his own mask he fixed his eyes more ardently than before upon the splendid form of the Circassian Slave, his devouring looks sought to penetrate through her very garments and feast as it were upon the charms of her entire person,—so that in imagination did he finish and complete all the flowing lines which traced the contours of her shape, and all the inflections and swelling reliefs of her luxuriant figure,—until her apparel grew diaphanous, and her whole form became visible through the transparent vesture. Then, still giving the rein to his wanton fancy, he felt as if he were already folding in his embrace that fine person and revelling in all the sensuous enjoyment of its charms;—and maddened by the desires which were consuming him, he seized her hand, murmuring in that tone of half-suffocation which is caused by extreme emotion, whether of bliss or pain—"Lady, dear lady, let us depart to thine abode of love, and mystery, and pleasure!"

"Yes—we will hasten away from this scene which has no longer any attractions for me, since I have encountered you, my Gabriel," returned the Circassian Slave, her voice trembling with a profound sigh of pleasure.

At that moment Lord Montgomery perceived the Flower Girl standing at a little distance and evidently surveying himself and his companion with the most absorbing attention; and suspecting that her views were far from friendly if not downright mischievous,—though who she was or what her aims might be, he could not for the life of him conjecture,—he hastened to lead the Circassian Slave away from the busy, brilliant scene.

"Do you know that female masque who seemed to be watching us?" inquired the lady in a voice suddenly denoting a profound agitation as she quickened her pace.

"Who?—the Flower Girl?" said Lord Montgomery, now absolutely hurrying the Circassian Slave along towards the nearest avenue of egress. "No—I do not think that she was paying any attention to us——"

"But I am certain she was," interrupted the lady, with a strong emphasis. "Ah! Florimel, 'tis some fair one who loves you—who knows that you were coming hither disguised—and who surveys *me* with all the rage of jealousy! Heavens—if there should be a scene—a disturbance——"

And Lord Montgomery not only felt his unknown companion's hand trembling nervously, but also observed her entire frame vibrating and quivering with alarm.

"Fear nothing, lady—we are neither watched nor followed," he said, in a tone of joyous reassurance, after having cast a rapid glance behind.

"Oh! what a weight is lifted from my soul!" murmured the Circassian Slave, likewise looking hastily back and perceiving that the Flower Girl was now in earnest conversation with a female masque representing a Gipsy. "But I feel as if I should faint, Gabriel—the terror I have experienced has been, cruel—and now this sudden reaction——"

"Will you not be able to reach your carriage, dearest lady?" inquired Montgomery, in a tone which evinced his alarm although he still had the presence of mind to disguise his voice.

"No—I fear not—a faintness is coming over me——Oh! for a glass of water!" murmured the Circassian Slave, now supporting herself in such a manner that her two arms were passed as it were in his own and her bosom leant against his shoulder.

Fortunately they at this moment emerged from the midst of the masquerade-scene and entered the corridor whence opened the lower tier of boxes—so

that they were now comparatively free from observation, few persons being near. The air of that place likewise felt pure and fresh after the stifling warmth of the atmosphere inside; and, leaning against the wall for a few moments, the Circassian Slave appeared to recover from the languor of faintness which the heat of the theatre and the dread of detection had combined to bring upon her.

But here we must leave Lord Montgomery and his unknown companion for a short space, while we return to the Flower Girl and those who were engaged in watching her movements.

CHAPTER CXLIV.

THE MASQUERADE.—SCENE THE THIRD.

OUR readers will remember that having thrown at Lord Montgomery those angry denunciations of "traitor" and "perjurer," the Flower Girl sped hastily away with the apparent intention of quitting the theatre;—while, on the other hand, the Prince of Wales and Germain hurried in pursuit of her amidst the bustling, thronging, laughing, chattering multitude of masques.

But again—as on the former occasion—a thought seemed to strike the Flower Girl, causing her first to slacken her pace—then to stop short—and lastly, to turn round and begin to retrace her way slowly towards the spot where she had left Earl Montgomery.

It was evident that she was tortured by some cruel uncertainty, or that her bosom was wrung by emotions of a very painful nature. Not a syllable did she reply to the various jests, some innocent enough and others equivocal to a degree, which were addressed to her in her character of a Flower Girl: negligently upon her beauteous arm hung the basket—and her breast heaved and fell with profound sighs that swelled almost into audible and suffocating sobs.

"I cannot make her out, at all," observed the Prince of Wales to Germain. "She is decidedly as unhappy as she well can be——"

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said the valet, "that jealousy is at the bottom of it all. See—her hands are ungloved—can we not ascertain whether she be a married woman?"

"Your eyes are as sharp as mine, Germain," replied the Prince. "But I will approach her—— Ah! what beautiful hands — how taper are the fingers! No—she does not wear a wedding-ring——"

"Then she is a kept mistress, perhaps," suggested Germain.

"I'll swear she is no such thing!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, almost indignant at the allegation, as if it positively reflected upon himself or in some way wounded his own feelings. "I am sufficiently experienced in womankind—or, to speak more delicately on the subject, I am quite *connoisseur* enough in all that relates to the fair sex, to be able to form some estimate of a female's rank, position, and social standing, by her general deportment, her mien, her walk, her manner, and her apparel—aye, even though her countenance be masked and her dress be a fancy-costume. Now, in the present instance, Germain," continued the Prince, "I have observed about that charming creature a certain reserve and bashfulness—a shrinking from the contact of the multitudes around her—a sense of isolation and of a position unusually friendless and unprotected,—all of which may be regarded as striking proofs that she is not accustomed to such scenes as this, and that she assuredly is not here for her amusement. She has not the effrontery of a kept mistress—and she is scarcely even bold enough for a girl who is looking after a lover to whom she has surrendered her virtue. Besides, there is a virgin air about her,—a perfume of innocence as it were—an odour of chastity—combined with all that first freshness of youth which nothing in the shape of amorous pleasure has yet marred——"

"Behold, your Royal Highness!" exclaimed Germain, suddenly catching his master by the sleeve: "a masque has accosted the Blue Domino——"

"Ah! a Circassian Slave," said the Prince. "And, by Jove! she is a splendid woman likewise! But I prefer my favourite—the Flower Girl. Where is she?"

"There," returned the valet. "She has posted herself in such a position that she can observe everything which passes between the Blue Domino with the singular braiding and the superb Circassian Slave!"

"A decided case of love and jealousy," said the Prince, his eyes dwelling with a gloating and devouring look upon the beauteous form of the Flower Girl. "But it is a pure love—and——"

"And therefore your Royal Highness will not molest the poor Flower Girl, who seems to be unhappy enough already?" said Germain, fancying that he had really fallen into the right track of the Prince's thoughts upon the subject.

"You are mad, my good fellow!" exclaimed the royal voluptuary. "So far from abandoning my designs with regard to that fair creature, I am more than ever resolved to push the adventure to a triumphant issue. If her lover in the blue domino be neglectful and faithless, I will console her;—and if he be insensible to the graces of her person, I will teach her the road to a terrestrial paradise. Besides, there will be the charm of novelty in this conquest——"

"Your Royal Highness does not observe that the Blue Domino and the Circassian Slave are evidently talking together in an enamoured strain," said Germain; "and that the Flower Girl is watching them with a mingled intentness and agitation which menace a scene and an exposure."

"No—she is too well bred to create a disturbance, Germain," replied the Prince. "I will stake my existence that such exquisite graces—such ineffable charms—such ravishing attitudes, full of modesty and elegance, do not belong to one who will go into hysterics, set up a screaming, call her treacherous lover by harsh names aloud, or tear her rival's eyes out. No—all will pass off quietly enough——"

"Your Royal Highness is correct," exclaimed Germain, in a hurried whisper: "for, behold! the Blue Domino and the Circassian Slave are hastening away together—and——"

"Ah! my God—the poor Flower Girl is supporting herself against the wall!" cried the Prince. "What an opportunity to form her acquaintance——"

And he was already darting towards her, to catch her in his arms and save her from falling—when a female masque, clad as a Gipsy, glided suddenly past him and hurried up to the Flower Girl.

The Prince stopped short—muttered an oath of impatience—and then fell back a few paces to rejoin Germain.

"Your Royal Highness was anticipated in your good intentions by that Gipsy with the pretty figure and the picturesque attire," said the valet.

"Yes—perdition upon the Gipsy!" exclaimed the Prince. "But the manner in which she accosted the Flower Girl seems to bespeak another phase in her adventures of this evening—and we will continue to watch the fair one's movements for the present."

"So as to seize upon any incident which may transpire to the furtherance of our aims," added the valet.

But let us now draw our readers' attention a little more closely to the Flower Girl herself.

It was perfectly true that she was leaning against the wall for support—indeed, to save herself from sinking upon the floor—so overwhelming were the emotions under which she laboured. The deepest affliction and the heaviest weight of sorrow appeared to have fallen upon her on beholding the excellent understanding which evidently subsisted between the Blue Domino and the Circassian Slave; and when she saw them depart together, a species of vertigo seized upon her—her brain became dizzy—her sight failed her—and she felt as if all the chords which bound her immortal spirit to its mortal tenement were snapping with a fearful rapidity.

Suddenly a hand was laid gently upon her shoulder—and a soft voice said soothingly, "Dear lady, remember where you are—command yourself—control your feelings, I implore you!"

"And who are you, kind being?" asked the Flower Girl, exerting all her energies to regain her self-possession.

"I am one who knows you well," was the response, delivered in the same gentle tone as before.

The Flower Girl now regarded the Gipsy more attentively, and perceived that she was short in stature—beautifully symmetrical—and evidently young. Her face was carefully concealed by her mask: but fine dark eyes flashed through the holes—brilliant teeth were visible behind an aperture which that vizard had for the respiration—and luxuriant black hair was arranged in massive bands beneath the gipsy-hat which the female wore with a ravishing coquetry.

The eyes of the Flower Girl swept over the Gipsy in order to recognise her if possible by the traits of the figure, the stature, and as much as could be thus observed beneath her picturesque costume: but it was evident that the former could not call to mind any one within the circle of her acquaintance, on whom she was able to fix and identify as the Gipsy.

"You know me well," said the Flower Girl, at length: "but are you equally well known to me?"

"No, lady—you are totally unacquainted with me, except by name," was the response: "and that name," added the Gipsy, evidently endeavouring to smother a sigh, "is, alas! too well known throughout the land!"

"Singular being! what mean you?" demanded the Flower Girl. "And wherefore do you interest yourself in me? Is it possible that you are the writer of——"

"That anonymous note which induced you to come hither—eh?" said the Gipsy, a certain malignity penetrating through her tone and manner, and suddenly causing the Flower Girl to regard her with a less friendly interest than before. "Well—and you have seen with your own eyes the truth of all I told you in that note? But you did wrong to accost him, after my positive injunctions to the contrary."

"There was a moment when I could not control my feelings," said the Flower Girl, now sighing profoundly at the painful recollections of all that had so recently taken place and which even now appeared to her in the light of a horrid dream, and not a reality that was patent and undeniable. "But wherefore did you enjoin me in that note not to accost him within these walls—but to deliberate calmly ere I took any step in consequence of his infidelity? Did you suppose that I possessed an almost superhuman power of control over my feelings? Or rather, let me ask wherefore you should have interfered in this matter at all?"

"Those are *my* secrets, lady," said the Gipsy, assuming a tone of the profoundest mystery. "And now one word of advice."

"Speak," said the Flower Girl, with a cold and unaccountable shudder—for there was something implacable and even ferocious in the altered tone and manner of the Gipsy.

"When a virtuous woman's dignity is offended by a faithless lover," was the measured response of the latter, "she does not write a long letter of mingled complaint, upbraiding, and reproach: but she pens a few laconic words, commanding him to seek her presence no more, and leaving *him* to calculate and weigh all the motives which have suggested a proceeding at once so dignified and so imperious!"

"You have told me nothing that my own feelings as an injured woman would not have suggested," said the Flower Girl. "Have you aught more to observe?—and shall I ever know who you are and what were your motives——"

"Yes—in time you shall know everything," exclaimed the Gipsy;—and hurrying away, she was soon lost to the view of the Flower Girl in the thickest of the laughing, jesting, moving multitude of masqueraders.

"Now the fair one is again alone," said his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales to his faithful valet Germain—both of them having stood to observe the preceding scene from a short distance.

"The adventure draws towards a crisis, so far as the hopes and aims of your Royal Highness are concerned," replied Germain.

At this instant the Flower Girl, who had remained motionless in the deep abstraction of her feelings for nearly a minute after the Gipsy had left her, suddenly quitted the spot where she had been standing; and, avoiding the crowd as much as possible, issued from the brilliant scene.

Rapid was her pace—and with a visible anxiety to escape from the theatre did she hurry onward. Neither to the right nor to the left did she look—much less was a glance thrown behind her;—and therefore she did not perceive that a man in a black domino was closely following her.

On the landing she received her cloak from the woman in charge of the superfluous apparel of the visitors;—and, enveloping herself in the warm mantle, but still retaining her mask, she descended the grand staircase and passed out of the theatre.

"Carriage waiting, ma'am?—hackney-coach?—cab?" cried one of the numerous hangers-on about the place.

"A hackney-coach, if you please," was the response.

"Now then, fust coach there!" exclaimed the fellow;—and up drove a vehicle into which the Flower Girl immediately ascended. "Where to, ma'am?" was the next and last demand.

"To some respectable hotel," replied the Flower Girl, after a few moments' reflection.

"All right!" ejaculated the man, banging the door and touching his hat for the silver coin which the Flower Girl dropped into his hand.

And away drove the hackney-coach: but Germain, who had stripped off his mask and domino, was seated by the side of the coachman upon the box—and after a few minutes' conversation together, the valet handed five guineas to that individual, who secured them about his person, chuckling at the handsome amount of the bribe given for so easy a service as that which was required from him.

In about ten minutes the coach stopped; and down jumped Germain to open the door.

"What hotel is this?" inquired the Flower Girl, looking up and observing what appeared to her to be only a row of handsome private houses.

"The St. James's Family Hotel, ma'am," said Germain, officiously letting down the steps and handing the Flower Girl out of the vehicle.

Meantime the coachman had rung and knocked at the house door, which was almost instantaneously opened; and the appearance of a female servant with a candle in her hand reassured the Flower Girl, if indeed she had even for a moment entertained a suspicion that anything was wrong.

The night was piercing cold—eleven o'clock had struck—and therefore it was no wonder if Germain hurried the Flower Girl into the house: while the promptitude of his proceedings and the despatch which characterised the attentions he thus appeared to be showing to the lady, left her not an instant to ask herself who the courteous and obliging individual could possibly be. But as the light, which the female servant held in her hand, flashed upon his countenance, it instantly struck the Flower Girl that his features were not altogether unfamiliar to her. Still she had no time to pause and reflect where or when she had seen that genteel-looking man in black before,—for the female servant began to lead the way up a handsome and well-lighted staircase.

The Flower Girl followed mechanically—and she had just begun to reflect that it was somewhat extraordinary that such prompt and even officious attentions should be shown her, a stranger though she were at the house and not having even opened her lips to express what she required,—coming too alone at that hour of the night and in a masquerade dress;—upon all these points had she begun to reflect, we say—and a distant suspicion had even raised its nascent glimmering in her mind—when the servant threw open the door of an apartment, saying, "Walk in, if you please, madam."

The Flower Girl paused for an instant: then, feeling how ridiculous her hesitation would seem if her faint misgiving should prove unfounded, she threw her cloak upon a chair on the landing and advanced boldly forward.

The door closed behind her—she found herself in a large, handsomely furnished, and well-lighted room—and a tall figure, disguised in the garb of a Turk and wearing a mask upon his countenance, advanced to receive her.

"There must be some terrible mistake in all this," exclaimed the Flower Girl, stepping back and glancing round uneasily towards the door.

"No, charming lady," said the Turk; "there is no mistake, I can assure you! A little stratagem has been adopted, it is true—but you will pardon me, I feel convinced. And now let me introduce myself to you as Mr. Harley," added the Prince, removing the mask from his features.

"And I," said the lady whose whole frame had quivered violently when the familiar sound of the heir-apparent's voice first struck upon her ears, but who had recovered all herself-command and natural strength of mind ere he had brought his speech to a conclusion;—"and I," she exclaimed, slowly removing the satin mask from her own countenance, "am Pauline Clarendon!"

CHAPTER CXLV.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND THE SISTER OF HIS VICTIM.

A SUDDEN stupefaction appeared to seize upon the Prince of Wales the moment that the melodious but firm voice of Pauline breathed her well known name and that her fair hand took the satin covering from her lovely face.

Shame and humiliation were the first feelings which he experienced as the stupor of astonishment began to subside;—and then the fiendish thought suddenly struck him that as Pauline was ravishingly beautiful, there was no reason why he should not make an attempt upon her virtue.

On the other hand, the hatred which Pauline Clarendon bore towards the Prince of Wales, whom she loathed and detested as the cause of her sister's ruin and misfortunes, inspired her with feelings which not only prevented her from experiencing any apprehension on account of the position wherein she was now placed, but even prompted her to seize this opportunity of unfolding her sentiments upon certain matters.

"Upon my soul, this is the most remarkable coincidence that ever happened!" exclaimed the Prince of Wales at length. "But did you not observe me at the masquerade just now, Pauline?"

"Base and black indeed must your heart be," said the young lady, every lovely lineament of her countenance expressing the magnitude of the resentment and aversion which filled her soul,—"since you can so readily adopt a tone of insolent familiarity towards the sister of your victim!"

"You know that I am profoundly grieved for all that has happened in respect to Octavia," said the Prince: "but I really could not help it—'twas an ordinary case of love and gallantry the circumstances of which afterwards expanded into an importance and assumed a gravity which I could neither foresee nor prevent."

"The very observations which you have just made, Prince of Wales," exclaimed Pauline, bitterly, "prove the truth of my assertion relative to the blackness and baseness of your heart."

"Your words are more than rude, young lady," said the heir-apparent, biting his lip: "but I do not feel disposed to suffer them to goad me into anger. On the contrary, I had rather that you should unburthen your bosom of all and everything you may have to allege against me—and then,

perhaps, the calmer discourse which will follow may tend to place us upon a more friendly footing together."

"There is a certain ambiguity in the latter portion of your remarks which I do not choose to understand," said the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, drawing her fine form up to its full height and assuming the dignified hauteur of a virtue conscious of its own power. "But I will avail myself of your permission," she continued, with a subdued irony in her tone, "to make a few observations on the past. Your Royal Highness dared ere now to assimilate the case of my unhappy sister to those thousand-and-one instances of man's depravity and woman's weakness which are such ordinary episodes in the routine of society. But let me tell you, Prince of Wales, that in this particular amour to which I allude, the man's treachery was steeped in the blackness of Satan's own iniquity, and the woman's frailty was attended by circumstances as palliative in respect to herself as they are pathetic and touching to contemplate or describe. For Octavia loved you—loved you tenderly and devotedly,—not as the heir-apparent to the British throne—but as plain, untitled, and obscure Mr. Harley. Yes—she loved you for yourself only,—believing you to be a private gentleman with nothing extraordinary in your social position. On the contrary, she gave you her heart when you came to our house under circumstances calculated to engender suspicions rather than favourable notions relative to your character: for, if you choose to tax your memory with details doubtless so trifling to one in your position," continued Pauline, her tone of reproach again becoming tinctured with irony, "you will recollect the tale you told us of debts incurred for a friend and a flight from the bailiffs who sought to arrest you for those liabilities. Well, then—it was not as a Prince nor even as a rich man that Octavia regarded you when she gave you her virgin love! No:—it was as a simple gentle-

man, whose pecuniary affairs seemed at least to be involved in embarrassment—it was as the fugitive from pursuing harpies of the law, that you were thus admitted into the sanctuary of her soul! And when once you had obtained admission there, Oh! how soon—how soon did you rifle that shrine of the only gem which it possessed!—how prompt and how tremendous was the havoc made by your sacrilegious hand!—how remorseless was the vandalism of that ruin which you left in a temple where all was bright and holy, pure and uncorrupted, until then!"

"Pauline, you know that I could not repair by marriage the injury which I had done to your sister," said the Prince, somewhat touched by the young lady's reproaches, but assuming a more contrite tone and humbled manner in order to move her by that semblance of penitence and sorrow. "I confess that my conduct was wrong—very wrong: but I beseech you to consider that I was hurried on by an infatuation which I could not control—a passion which swept me along as if with the force of a torrent;—and I solemnly swear, Pauline, that had Satan demanded my soul as the price of Octavia's love, I should have madly embraced the compact. Pity me, therefore, while you blame me——"

"Ah! Prince of Wales," interrupted the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, "your tongue is so used to the ready utterance of passionate avowals, that the same language, with a few trifling verbal alterations, serves likewise in an apologetic sense. But I am not to be deluded by your sophistry: and therefore do I tell your Royal Highness to your face that the heartless treachery practised by you towards my sister, constitutes one of the blackest chapters in your life!"

"Pauline, I will not hear any more!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, now unable to curb his wrath.

"I thought that you had generously accorded me permission to give full vent to my feelings and sentiments upon this topic?" said the young lady, her rich red lips wreathing into a satirical smile.

"Proceed, then—proceed," cried the Prince, subduing his impatience as well as he was able: then to himself he said, "By heavens! she is ravishing in that garb—aye, and also in that angry mood;—and I will gratify my vengeance for all these reproaches at the same time that I will appease the flame of this new passion which devours me!"

"I have but little more to say," continued Pauline, who was too much absorbed in the engrossing topic of her sister's wrongs to observe the peculiar nature of the pre-occupation which seized upon the Prince while he was thus musing to himself. "But I cannot depart hence nor suffer this opportunity to escape without protesting—solemnly protesting, alike in my sister's name and in my own—against that scandalous compromise which, although my own parent was a party to it, I cannot do otherwise than denounce in the strongest terms. Alas! alas! that my infatuated father, dazzled by the false light of empty honours and ruled by the designing woman whom he has made his wife, should have consented to receive a title as the atonement and the propitiation for his outraged daughter's wrongs! But that your Royal Highness may not think so ill of me nor do me so foul an act of injustice as to suppose that I rejoice in the sudden elevation of my family to the rank of nobility, I now solemnly declare that I look with loathing, with abhorrence, and with shame, upon this gilding which has been spread over an indelible disgrace; and while my heart sickens at the thought that my own father could accept such a compensation for so immeasurable a wrong, I likewise hold in boundless contempt that Royal Family who could have dared in the first instance to offer the miserable bauble of a coronet in return for the priceless gem of a woman's virtue!"

"And now, Pauline, you have said all that you have to say," observed the Prince, with the coolness and heartless indifference of a thorough libertine; "and you will perhaps permit me to speak. But shall we not be seated?" he asked: for throughout the preceding dialogue they had remained standing at a short distance from each other.

"No," replied Pauline: "our interview will terminate in a few minutes—and I am not so wearied that I cannot dispense with a seat while listening to anything that you may have to say."

"Be it so," exclaimed the Prince, for a moment abashed, embarrassed, and even overawed by that dignity which the young lady wore as it were without an effort, and which made her as a mere Woman more powerful in a moral sense than he was as a Prince: but casting off that strange influence which thus dominated him for nearly a minute, he said, "You have reproached me at great length for my conduct towards Octavia—and you have likewise repudiated all idea of adhesion to that species of tacit compromise which has made your father a peer. Well—I have already admitted that my behaviour in respect to your sister was improper and even cruel; and if you can show me what reparation I, as a Prince, and as the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms, can make, you have but to name your demands. Then, as for the compromise, I frankly and candidly acknowledge my conviction that you have spoken the truth in denouncing and disavowing it. But while I thus do justice to your own independence of spirit and virtuous indignation of feeling," continued the Prince, in a tone of courteous hauteur, "I do not hesitate to declare my opinion that since your father is satisfied with the arrangements which have been made, you have no longer a right to complain. Octavia belongs to her sire—and not to her sister!"

"Contemptible sophistry!" ejaculated Pauline, her beauteous countenance becoming red with indignation: and the crimson glow suffused itself over her neck and all that was visible of her virgin bosom.

"Well—it may sound like sophistry to your ears," said the Prince, in an easy and familiar tone—as if he knew that not only the argument was on his side, but that he had a means in reserve of humbling that lovely girl so dignified and so strong in the consciousness of her virtue. "It is also the opinion of the world and the expression of the law, that I thus enunciate: for the parent alone could commence an action for the seduction of his daughter. But let us now take leave of this subject and pass on to another. I presume you fully comprehend that it was in consequence of a stratagem you were brought hither?" said the heir-apparent, with the coolest effrontery imaginable.

"I know that you are capable of any villany, Prince," returned Pauline, a slight shudder passing over her frame as she was thus reminded of the circumstances of her position at so late an hour: but

instantaneously assuming the calm demeanour of courage and self-possession, she said, "Nevertheless, bad as you are, I can scarcely suppose you capable of persevering in an evil intention towards one who turns out to be the sister of your unhappy victim?"

"Candidly speaking, my dear Pauline," answered the Prince, whose desires were excited almost to madness by the charms of the young lady,—"I fell in love with you at the masquerade, solely from the contemplation of your beauteous figure and the indescribable graces of your person; and now that your countenance beams upon me in all its glory, I am not likely to abandon the enchanting hope of possessing you—even though the removal of that mask has revealed to me the features of Pauline Clarendon!"

"This language—to *me!*" exclaimed the young lady, once more becoming crimson with indignation—while her whole form shook as if with a strong spasm passing through it.

"Yes—to *you*—Pauline," cried the Prince, his libidinous looks gloating upon the charms that were set off so ravishingly by the picturesque costume which displayed rather than concealed them. "And now, without hypocrisy—without subterfuge—without circumlocution—let me tell you frankly and resolutely, that your beauty has excited me to a frenetic pitch, and that you shall be mine, be the consequences what they may!"

"Villain!" ejaculated Pauline, now seriously alarmed: and she flew to the door.

"The bird escapes me not thus easily!" cried the Prince, in a triumphant tone, as the young maiden fruitlessly endeavoured to open the door, which had been locked on the other side. "Come, Pauline—you are a being endowed with good sense and a strong intellect—and you can listen to reason. May I crave your patience for a few moments?"

And his Royal Highness leant against the chimney-piece with the cool complacency of a man who is certain of achieving a victory, or who has the game in his own hands.

"Reason!" ejaculated Pauline, summoning to her aid all the courage and self-possession which she now felt to be requisite to meet the dangers and difficulties of her position: and, moving slowly away from the door, she advanced towards the Prince with an air of confidence which she did not however in reality feel. "Yes—I can listen to reason: but I am at a loss to conceive how anything which you may have to say to me, can deserve that denomination."

"We shall see," said the heir-apparent. "And let me begin by informing you that I watched all your movements and proceedings ere now at the masquerade; and I saw enough to convince me that you have no reason to be satisfied with the conduct of the Blue Domino. So long as I remained in ignorance who the fair Flower Girl could be, I was of course unable to penetrate entirely into the mystery of those proceedings;—but now that I know her to be the beautiful Miss Pauline Clarendon, I come to the very natural conclusion that the Blue Domino must have been her fickle, inconstant, and faithless lover, the young Lord Florimel. Ah! I see by your countenance that my surmise is correct——"

"And wherefore do you thus torture me with these allusions?—wherefore do you seek to probe the anguish which so much perfidy has excited in my breast?" exclaimed Pauline, in an impassioned tone—and the tears started forth upon her long lashes, while her bosom heaved and fell convulsively.

"I was about to observe, my dear Pauline," resumed the Prince, "that——"

"Your Royal Highness will be pleased to forbear from addressing me with a familiarity not warranted by circumstances," said the young lady, in a resolute tone.

"Well, then—I will call you the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, your father being a peer," observed the Prince, with a satirical smile.

"Proceed—proceed," cried the young maiden impatiently: "I am anxious to depart hence. What more has your Royal Highness to say to me?—for as yet I have heard none of the reason to which you requested me to listen."

"Because you have interrupted me," rejoined the Prince. "For I was about to observe that as Lord Florimel has evidently proved faithless to you, and as his conduct was positively outrageous and cruel to a degree, it is impossible that you—a young lady of high spirit and independent disposition—can tamely submit to so gross an insult as to behold your rival, whoever she might be, preferred before your very face—aye, and in defiance of anything that you may have said to the young nobleman when you accosted him so abruptly and then quitted him in such evident anger. What, then, should you do to be avenged upon the perfidious Florimel?—and which species of vengeance would be the most complete? Can you not understand me, Pauline? If not, I must speak more plainly—and in measured words and intelligible language must I recommend that you retaliate in the same spirit and after the same fashion. Become my mistress—accept my protection—and then, when dashing round the Park in your splendid equipage, or seated in your box at the Opera, you may look scorn, defiance, and contempt at the faithless Florimel."

"Wretch!" exclaimed Pauline in a tone vibrating with the terrible indignation which convulsed her entire form and made her face, her neck, and her bosom turn the hue of a peony all in a moment: "wretch! is it possible that you can hold such language to the sister of the too confiding girl whom your villany has robbed alike of her virtue and her intellects? Oh! if I did not interrupt you ere the sentence which contained the odious proposition was completed,—if I did not burst forth at once in all the fury of my outraged and insulted spirit,—it was that amazement paralysed my tongue! Almighty God, is it possible ——Oh! is it possible that this man shall one day reign over the people of England?"

"Yes—by heavens, will I—for you and all the people of England together were made to become my slaves," exclaimed the Prince, yielding to a sudden access of rage. "And now, Miss Pauline Clarendon—the prude—the pattern-maiden—the chaste damsel *par excellence*, I will teach you that what I have said is true and that you were born to be subservient to my desires. No more of your sentimental trash concerning your sister: for your father has reaped his reward! Yes—and even as a Barony sufficed as an atonement for Octavia's defoliated virtue, an Earldom will be clutched by him as ample recompense for Pauline's honour."

"Ah! you throw off the mask completely, Prince?—you proclaim yourself a villain?" cried Pauline, speaking in a tone which sounded like that of

calm defiance, but which was really that of despair. "No—you cannot mean to perpetrate such an outrage? Besides—even if you should attempt it—I will resist until the very death—I will alarm the house—my screams shall arouse the neighbourhood—or, as a last resource, I will leap from the window——"

And as she uttered these words in a voice which had risen from the dull tone of despair to the excitement of an hysterical frenzy, she sprang towards the casement—tore aside the curtains—and rushed into the recess to throw open the window. But her hands only encountered the shutters—and she felt that the iron bar which went across them, was fastened with a padlock!

Staggering back into the room, baffled, disappointed, and with an increasing terror gaining upon her, the unhappy Pauline vainly endeavoured to recall her self-possession: the laugh of the Prince rang half triumphantly, half mockingly in her ears—and a voice seemed to whisper in her soul that she was undone!

"My dear girl," said his Royal Highness, who was still lounging negligently before the fire and had not moved a step to retain her when she flew so wildly towards the window,—"you must think me very foolish indeed, if you imagine that the smallest avenue of escape is left for you. No—no: though ignorant that I had to deal with a stubborn and obstinate prude, yet I came hither with all imaginable speed to make preparations for your arrival, the moment I saw you safely ensconced in the hackney-coach and my faithful Germain mounted on the box."

"Ah!" ejaculated Pauline: "methought that man's face was not unfamiliar to me. But, O God! have mercy upon me," she cried, clasping her hands in despair: "for the wickedness of my persecutors is triumphing in every point!"

"And the conquest will be speedily achieved, dearest Pauline," exclaimed the Prince,—"despite of your screams—your entreaties—your resistance! But rather—Oh! much rather would I that you should come a willing sacrifice to my arms—tender, yielding, and submissive—obedient to that destiny which you cannot resist—making a merit of necessity, and abandoning yourself to the full enjoyment of those ecstatic pleasures——"

"O horror!" moaned the unhappy girl, sinking upon her knees and still clasping her hands with the wildness of despair. "What! will no one come to my assistance?—is it possible that these walls can beat back my screams—my cries for help——"

"Pauline, you must be mad to hope for succour in this house," interrupted the Prince, with a smile of almost fiendish satisfaction: "for if you have not already guessed that you are an inmate of the hospitable dwelling of Mrs. Brace——"

"Mrs. Brace!" repeated the wretched Pauline, springing from her knees to her feet as if she were suddenly electrified: for well she knew that fatal name in connexion with her beloved sister's ruin. "O God! have mercy upon me!" she exclaimed—and then, obedient to the impulse of feelings worked up to a pitch of the most excruciating anguish, she burst forth into screams which would have pierced through the thickest dungeon-wall.

"Peace, silly fool!" cried the Prince, now rushing forward and winding his arms around her form: then, straining her with a species of maddening and ferocious violence to his breast, he exclaimed, "I will stifle thy shrieks with kisses!"

And as he glued his lips, hot and parched with the fever of burning lust, to her delicious mouth, her senses abandoned her—and she remained powerless and inanimate in his arms!

CHAPTER CXLVI.

THE HACKNEY COACH AND THE PRIVATE CARRIAGE.

GRIEVED as we are to leave the reader in a state of suspense relative to the issue of the adventure of Pauline Clarendon and the Prince of Wales, we must nevertheless break the thread of that episode for a short space and return to Covent Garden Theatre.

We left Lord Montgomery and the Circassian Slave at the moment when having issued from the scene of the masquerade, they stopped in a corridor to enable the lady to breathe the fresh air which circulated in that place.

Speedily recovering, and no longer requiring any beverage to quench a thirst that had for a moment seemed intolerable, the Circassian Slave took Montgomery's arm again; and they now proceeded to quit the theatre. Down the grand staircase they went—that man wrapped in the mystery of the blue domino, and that woman whose splendid form was set off to such brilliant advantage by the oriental garb that she wore! And Lord Montgomery felt proud as well as happy in the companionship of this superb creature, the flexible grace and soft voluptuousness of whose entire figure attracted the gaze of the loungers upon the stairs and in the vestibule; —and as he felt her bosom press gently against his shoulder, he hastened his pace—her own of course at the same time—in order to be alone with her as speedily as possible.

"Is your carriage in attendance, dear lady?" he asked, in the same low and assumed tone which he had all along adopted.

"Not here, Gabriel," was the softly uttered response. "We must take a hackney-coach in the first instance——"

"Be it so, dear lady," observed the nobleman. "But have you no cloak to protect yourself against the cold?"

"Ah! I forgot—'tis upon the landing above," said the Circassian Slave, stopping short at the foot of the staircase as she thus spoke. "Here is the duplicate-ticket which I received from the woman who takes charge of the cloaks."

"One moment and I will return," said Lord Montgomery; and, taking the little piece of pasteboard, he hastened up the staircase.

The next instant a tall footman in dark livery accosted the Circassian Slave, and with a respectful salutation, said, "Is the carriage to take up your ladyship here?"

"No, Mason," immediately replied the Circassian Slave. "You will wait for me in Great Russell Street, close by the British Museum; and you will be upon the watch for a hackney-coach. I shall not be alone—and you will adopt with promptitude all the necessary precautions."

The lady spoke with a peculiar significancy which

the domestic evidently comprehended full well: and touching his hat, he instantaneously disappeared. In a few moments Lord Montgomery rejoined the lady, over whose shoulders he threw the handsome cloak which he had been to fetch, and the forgetting of which was a mere stratagem on her part in order to gain the opportunity of issuing her commands to the footman relative to the carriage.

Enveloped in her mantle and leaning upon Montgomery's arm, she now issued from the theatre; and, a hackney-coach being summoned, the disguised pair entered it together.

"Where to, sir?" demanded the driver, addressing the nobleman.

"Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury—and stop opposite the Museum," the lady hastened to reply; —and away went the coach.

"Oh! my dearest friend," murmured Lord Montgomery, now taking the plump warm hand of his companion and pressing it fervently in his own,— "how can I sufficiently thank you for thus remembering me and condescending to renew the ineffable delights of that first occasion when you made me so supremely happy! Ere now in the theatre I had no time to express to you all the gratitude I experience—all the raptures which you have excited in my soul—all the bliss which you have poured into my heart. But now—the first moment that we are really alone together—I hasten to give you the fondest, tenderest, and most fervid assurances of gratitude—love—adoration! O lady—never have I forgotten, even for an instant, those four hours of elysian enjoyment which I tasted in your arms;—and my soul can scarcely believe that so much happiness is in store for it once again—but trembles lest it should awaken from a delicious dream and find all the ecstatic thoughts which now fill it oozing rapidly away, and all the warmth of its blissful emotions turning into the iciness of a stern disappointment."

In this strain did Earl Montgomery continue to speak for some time—his purpose being to postpone as long as possible that moment so perilous to his hopes and his entire stratagem, when the truth must be revealed and the tremendous discovery would be made that he was *not* Lord Florimel. For he had already calculated that if he were only allowed the leisure and the opportunity to excite the passions of this woman whose nature was so ardent and whose desires were so uncontrollable, he would be certain to carry out his adventure to a successful issue and triumph over any feeling of anger or alarm which the discovery of the imposture might raise up in the bosom of the wanton lady. In a word, his purpose was to reduce her to the absolute necessity of accepting himself as a substitute for the lover whom she hoped to meet;—and as he pretty well guessed that the ride in a hackney-coach to Great Russell Street was only one of the many precautions which the crafty lady was wont to adopt, and that some other vehicle would receive them at that spot in order to convey them elsewhere, he calculated that it would be far more conducive to the success of his scheme to maintain the cheat until they were within the close vicinage of their ultimate destination, wherever it might be.

And fortunate, perhaps, was it for the success of the Earl's stratagem that the lady had taken the hired vehicle in the first instance. For had she at once entered her own carriage in company with Montgomery, she would have instantaneously taken off her mask and torn the satin vizard likewise away from his countenance in order to pour forth her voluptuous soul in the caresses which she would have lavished upon him. His whiskers would then have revealed to her all in a moment that he was *not* the young nobleman whom she had hoped and expected to meet; and in the first fury of her rage, terror, and disappointment, she might have indignantly ordered the intruder to quit her carriage—a command which, as a gentleman, he would have been bound to obey.

Such might have been the sudden result of the adventure had the private carriage been used in the first instance. But, as it was, the Circassian Slave did not think it worth while to disturb her own mask immediately, inasmuch as it would be necessary to resume it again on passing from the hackney-coach to the carriage: she accordingly restrained her longings to press her lips to those of her companion;—and, contenting herself by reclining her head on his shoulder and abandoning her hand to his pressure, she listened in a dreamy and sensuous rapture to the glowing language which he poured into her ears with all the deep tenderness of his whispering voice.

In a little less than ten minutes the hackney-coach stopped; and Montgomery heard some one say to the driver, "You need not get down—I will open the door—and here is your fare."

Immediately afterwards the door of the hackney-coach was opened by a tall man who had on a great-coat such as was worn in those times by footmen in livery; and his hat was put on in such a way as to shade his countenance. Montgomery instantly remembered *the tall lacquey* mentioned by Lord Florimel, and felt convinced that this was the same.

The moment the door of the vehicle was opened, the Circassian Slave hastened to alight; and the Earl immediately followed her. The instant his feet touched the pavement, he darted a rapid glance up and down the street to ascertain if a carriage were in attendance; and he had just time to observe that there was an equipage standing in the deep shade thrown by the gate-way of the British Museum, when the hood of his domino was pulled completely over his mask and he was thus involved in utter darkness. At the same moment he heard the hackney-coach drive away;—and he was then hurried along towards the spot where he had observed the carriage standing.

The vigorous arms which thus dealt so unceremoniously with him, again reminded him of Lord Florimel's history and seemed to confirm his belief that the man in the great coat and the slouched hat was the same tall footman who figured in that narrative.

Into the carriage was he now promptly hoisted;—and as the door closed behind him, he was received in the arms of the lady who had already taken her place in the vehicle.

"My own dearest Gabriel," she exclaimed, in a tone full of passion, and joy, and anxious longing, as the carriage drove rapidly away,—"we may now embrace each other and exchange kisses of love and tenderness!"

And as she thus spoke, she threw back the hood of Montgomery's domino—tore the mask from his countenance—and glued her lips to his mouth with all that frenzied ardour and devouring fury which Lord Florimel had so glowingly described.

"Pardon — pardon, dearest lady," murmured the Earl, straining her to his breast.

"O God! who are you?" she cried with a faint shriek;—and, tearing herself from his arms, she appeared to fall back upon the opposite seat in a state of utter annihilation.

The nobleman fell upon his knees in the carriage and took her hand, which was abandoned to him as if by one in a dream or in a mood of utter listlessness. He pressed it to his lips—and he felt that it was warm, although it trembled not nor indicated any emotion on the part of its owner. But that she had not fainted, he could tell by its soft warm contact; and moreover he heard the low but quick and stifling manner of her respiration. The interior of the vehicle was dark as pitch: but by all that we have just explained, the Earl judged that the lady must have fallen into that state of mingled despair and bewilderment which occasions a total helplessness.

"Pardon me, adorable woman—pardon me!" he exclaimed, throwing as much tender entreaty as possible into that manly tone which he no longer sought to disguise. "It is true that Lord Florimel kneels not at your feet: but he who has taken his place and now implores your compassion—your forbearance—your mercy, is as honourable a man. And what is more, I may without vanity declare that in personal appearance I am not deficient in some of nature's bounties. Whether my manners are those of a vulgarian or a gentleman, I leave you to judge;—and as for my rank, it is even superior to that of Lord Florimel. But if you would ask me whether I can appreciate as well as he the full amount of that happiness which is to be enjoyed in your society,—if you should entertain any misgiving with regard to the obedience I may be disposed to pay to the terms and conditions you will impose upon me,—and if you doubt the prudence of trusting yourself to a stranger under circumstances so strange,—Oh! I beseech you to be reassured on those points—I implore you to place your confidence in me—and you will render me the happiest as well as the most devoted of mortals!"

As Lord Montgomery was giving utterance to this impassioned address, he gradually drew himself in closer contact with the lady who was half-sitting and half-reclining on the seat: he leant softly towards her—he passed his left arm gradually round her form, still retaining her hand clasped in his right,—and he at length approached his own countenance to her burning cheek. Then at last he felt her whole frame vibrate:—and drawing her still more closely towards him, he ventured to fasten his lips to her's.

For a few moments she appeared to abandon herself to the ecstatic feelings with which that long and sensuous kiss inspired her: but, as if all in a moment awakening to a full sense of her position with a stranger and to a keen appreciation of the infamous trick which had been played upon her, she started from the Earl's embrace and repulsed him violently, exclaiming in a tone profoundly troubled, "Who are you?"

"I am a friend of Lord Florimel, dear lady," was the response delivered in a voice of tender appeal and mournful entreaty; "and I happened to be at his house when the masquerade-ticket and the domino arrived. The conversation which ensued, led him to narrate the adventure of love and mystery that happened to him fifteen months ago; and when he declared that his engagement to the Hon Miss Pauline Clarendon would not permit him to keep the appointment so unmistakably signified through the medium of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino, the idea struck me that if he were so stoical as to refuse the bliss of heaven I would at least make a desperate effort to secure that enjoyment for myself."

"And was he privy to your imposture?—did he lend himself to your treachery?" demanded the lady, in a low deep tone which afforded no indication of the feeling that she now entertained towards the Earl—neither encouraging him in hope nor yet confirming him in despair: and as the darkness of the tomb prevailed in the vehicle, he had no means of judging her emotions save by her voice, which thus suddenly ceased to be an index.

"No, lady," he said, in answer to her questions: "Lord Florimel is utterly ignorant of my present proceeding—and I hope to God that he will remain so. Intimate as I am with him, it was easy for me to obtain possession of this blue domino; and I trusted to my own prudence and your kindness for the rest. And will you not believe me when I assure you that, although I have not seen your features and am never likely to obtain a glimpse of them, yet that I already love you with an ardour—oh! with an ardour which would make me undertake any enterprise and dare any peril to render you a service—while not even the temptation of a sovereign crown should induce me to do you harm. Permit me, then, to love you, my worshipped unknown—permit me to be thy slave, thou being so full of mystery! For the graces of thy form have captivated my heart and ravished my senses—and I already picture to myself a countenance of corresponding beauty. Without therefore even beholding that countenance, I can love thee well—oh! well—dear lady: for I can paint in imagination those features which I deem fit and suitable for one possessing so noble a form — and thus my happiness will be complete! Will you, then, scorn such a love as this?—will you reject a passion so earnest, so tender, and so profound? No: but you will pardon me for anything savouring of treachery that there may have been in my conduct—you will forgive me for the imposture which I practised in order to obtain this introduction to thee? For my imagination was so inflamed by the narrative which I received from the lips of Lord Florimel, that I was absolutely tortured with an excruciating curiosity to form thine acquaintance—yes, and maddened with a burning desire to obtain thy love! My crime, then, has been to adore thee from hearsay — to worship thee on account of all I heard concerning thee from another;—and surely there is something delicately flattering and touchingly complimentary in all this, which would disarm even the most imperious and haughty woman of her indignation. Speak, lady—oh! speak—and tell me what I am to expect: but remember that this passion which I now experience is stronger than myself—and terrible indeed would prove its disappointment and its despair!"

At the moment when Earl Montgomery commenced this long address, the lady had withdrawn herself altogether from the slightest contact with him: not a portion of her oriental garb touched his blue domino—at least so far as she could prevent such contiguity in the total darkness of the

carriage. But by degrees as he spoke, and as his voice gradually grew more tender, his language more impassioned, and his manner more appealing, he insinuated himself as it were closer and closer to the Circassian Slave; and she evidently became interested in his speech and evinced a soft yielding in her own conduct, by not withdrawing herself in proportion as he drew nearer to her. Thus was it that his hand presently touched her own—and the Earl felt every nerve in his frame vibrate with pleasure at the warm contact. Then he took that hand—and gently, gently he sank down until he was upon his knees again—and he pressed the hand to his heart as he continued in the fervid strain which we have described.

By degrees he felt the hand trembling in his own—then the arm was more completely abandoned to him;—and gradually did he become aware that the entire form of the lady was approaching nearer and nearer towards him. At length her breath fanned his cheek—he could even hear the pulsation of her heart as its beating indicated the trouble of conflicting emotions — and in a few instants a smooth forehead was laid upon his own. Then with apparent timidity did he circle her waist with his arms; and as the last words of his impassioned appeal fell from his lips, she threw herself upon his breast, murmuring in a faint and tremulous tone, "Yes—I pardon thee—I pardon thee!"

Ecstatic was the thrill of triumph which passed through the form of Montgomery as these words fell upon his ears; and in the next moment, burning was the kiss which he imprinted upon the moist plump mouth of his charming unknown. And he felt her entire person undulate with a soft, gradual, and sensuous writhing, as that kiss seemed to pour floods of transport in unto her soul; while low and scarcely articulate accents of pleasure escaped in a continuous billing murmur from her lips—so that the depth of this ardent woman's passion resembled the cord of a harp which curls with a wavy movement and gives forth a gentle humming sound when thrown upon the scorching hearth.

But all of a sudden the mysterious unknown seemed to recollect herself again and once more recover at least a considerable portion if not the whole of her presence of mind: for gently but firmly disengaging herself from the nobleman's embrace, she said, "You have not yet told me who you are."

"Lady, it was an oversight, but unintentional, I can assure you," returned the patrician: "for, if you will remember, I alluded to my rank when I declared it to be superior to that of Lord Florimel."

"Then, without farther preface, who are you?" demanded the lady in a somewhat peremptory tone.

"I am the Earl Montgomery," was the response.

It seemed to the nobleman that a strong spasm shook the lady's form as he thus proclaimed himself: at least he fancied that he caught that abrupt kind of start which is perceived in the midst of an intense darkness only by the sudden rustling which it occasions to the dress. But he was not sure: and as a profound silence and a complete immoveability instantaneously followed on the part of the lady, he began to think that he must have been mistaken and that instead of the announcement of his name and rank having produced any particular effect upon her, she was even now meditating what course she ought to pursue.

"She doubtless knows me by reputation," he thought within himself; "and she mistrusts me. She has perhaps heard that I am dissipated—gay—addicted to women—and loose in money matters; and she trembles at the idea of pushing this adventure any farther. It is even possible that she may know me—that we are acquaintances—that we have met in the saloons of fashion—and that she entertains an antipathy towards me, or a dread that I should discover who she is. And yet I have not the slightest suspicion who she can be! But then I am acquainted with so many ladies of splendid figure; and moreover those whom I have been accustomed to see in their ordinary apparel, would appear in a different light and to greater or lesser advantage in the fancy costume of a Circassian Slave. No — assuredly I cannot think of any one, within the range of my acquaintance, whom I can identify with my mysterious companion. Or rather, I remember a dozen whose superb forms would probably look equally well if similarly attired. But how can I pick out one of those and fix upon her as my unknown charmer opposite? No—all is mystery in that respect;—and whether we are indeed known to each other in the glittering world of fashion, or whether we are total strangers, her secret seems safe enough. Why, then, does she thus appear to hesitate?"

These reflections occupied about a minute, during which the Circassian Slave continued silent and motionless, as if she were plunged in the profoundest reverie.

"And you are Eugene Montgomery?" she at length said, with so peculiar an expression in her tone that the Earl could not for the life of him at the moment determine whether it were indicative of satisfaction, swayed by astonishment, or influenced by vexation. "I have heard of your lordship—yes—I have heard of you——and report represents you as somewhat wild and unsteady. But still—you are handsome — yes — very handsome, Eugene," she continued, her voice suddenly becoming kind and tender beyond all possibility of mistake;—"and your nature is fervid and impassioned! Oh! let me then hesitate no longer," she cried, in a gushing enthusiasm of voice, manner, and feelings: "but let me devote myself to love and pleasure, with you as my companion! Yes, Eugene—I pardon you for the perfidy which you practised in order to be received as a substitute for your friend; and I rely upon your honour that Lord Florimel shall remain ignorant of all this. Not that he is now anything to me—or ever was—otherwise than as the object of a transitory caprice which seized upon me fifteen months ago and which revived again this week. Nor do I dread discovery: for the precautions I adopted with him and shall adopt this night with you, defy the utmost keenness of penetration and the deepest searching of curiosity. Nevertheless I would not that these adventures should become a common topic of conversation, inasmuch as they might be alluded to in my presence and cause me to experience a temporary confusion. If, then, you be really grateful for the pardon which I have accorded you, Eugene—and if you only entertain towards me one hundredth part of all those impassioned feelings which you ere now depicted so eloquently,—you

will swear to maintain an inviolable secrecy respecting the incidents of this night?"

"I swear, beloved lady," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "Besides, you have this guarantee—that I do not wish to forfeit Florimel's friendship; which I should assuredly do, were he to discover the part that I have played towards you and which he little expected or intended his narrative to suggest. And now, dear lady, are you satisfied?"

"Yes, Eugene—perfectly," was the reply:—"and thus do I convince thee of the sincerity of my word," she added, throwing herself into his arms and abandoning herself to his fervid caresses.

Almost immediately afterwards the carriage stopped; and in an instant did the lady draw the hood of the domino over the Earl's head and tie a silk handkerchief around it in such a manner that neither the night-breeze nor any movement on his part could throw that cowl back.

The door of the vehicle was opened: the Circassian Slave descended first—and, guided by her hand, Lord Montgomery followed. Then ensued precisely the same circumstances which Lord Florimel had detailed in that particular portion of his narrative which referred to his own introduction to the lady's abode of love and mystery. For the Circassian Slave now led Earl Montgomery hastily forward: *a gate closed behind them—on they went—and it struck him that they were threading the gravel-walk of a garden or similar enclosure. In a couple of minutes they paused: the lady let go his hand for a moment—he heard a key turn in a lock—a door opened—his hand was again taken in the warm grasp that gave him a re-assuring pressure—they entered some building—and once more did the lady pause to shut and fasten the door behind them. She then conducted him up a staircase so thickly carpetted that even the clumsiest boots and the heaviest footsteps must have passed noiselessly over it;—and finally he was escorted along a passage into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed!*

There must we leave the nobleman and his mysterious but enchanting companion for the present.

CHAPTEN CXLVII.

THE MURDERESS AND HER ACCUSER.

While Pauline Clarendon and the Prince of Wales were brought into contact on the one hand, and while Lord Montgomery was in the carriage with the unknown lady on the other, an incident of a very different nature occurred on this night of multiform adventures.

Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her parlour, pondering upon many things and from time to time cheering her spirits with some excellent Medeira, —when Harriet suddenly made her appearance with a countenance as pale as death.

"What, in heaven's name, is the matter?" inquired the milliner, starting from her seat and instantaneously catching the infection of her abigail's dismay.

"That dreadful man—who was here the other morning—and who would not give his name—but who looks like a constable," gasped Harriet, almost suffocated by the terror that was upon her.

"Ah! what can he possibly want?" murmured Mrs. Brace in a dying tone: and, a horrible sensation coming over her, she clung to the mantel-piece for support.

"My God! my God!" exclaimed Harriet hysterically, and wringing her hands at the same time: "what shall we do?"

"For heaven's sake compose yourself!" said the milliner, all in a moment nerving herself with the courage of despair. "I know who he is—'tis Mobbs—and he is accessible to bribery. Besides, if he has come alone, he means no mischief——"

"Yes—he is alone," observed Harriet, catching eagerly at the hope which her mistress thus suddenly held out: "and he spoke civilly enough when he asked to see you, ma'am."

"Then introduce him at once—and fear nothing," said Mrs. Brace, assuming a tone of firmness and assurance.

The lady's-maid quitted the room; and during the few instants that the milliner remained alone, she exerted all the energy of her nature to tranquillise her feelings and compose her looks. For in spite of the soothing words which she had spoken to Harriet and with which she had even essayed to cheat herself into a belief of thorough security, a tremendous misgiving nevertheless lay like a weight of lead upon the guilty woman's soul. She felt a pain in the chest—a singular sensation, like that of collapse, in the stomach—and a tingling in all her limbs;—and when she drew a long breath, it seemed as if she were struggling to throw some heavy load off her. These were the symptoms of her awful alarm—the tortures which conscience inflicted upon her;—and despite the almost superhuman efforts which she made to conquer these feelings, it was in a horrible state of mind, though with a somewhat tranquillised countenance, that she met the looks of Mobbs as he appeared upon the threshold of her apartment.

The man was dressed in his drab great-coat—wore his slouching hat—carried a short but thick stick in his hand—and was followed by the ugly mongrel dog which went about with him when he was not very particularly engaged. Altogether, he looked a much greater ruffian than nine-tenths of the London rogues and rascals who were wont to tremble at his name;—and a glacial shudder passed through the milliner's entire form, penetrating even to the marrow of her bones, as she beheld his sinister eyes settling upon her with a frightful significancy.

And Mobbs saw how she quailed beneath his look and how her body writhed with the paroxysm of a profound and searching terror;—and he said within himself, "The Gallows' Widow was right—and the milliner is a murderess!"

"Walk in, Mr. Mobbs—and sit down," said the wretched woman, straining every nerve to seem composed, but enduring tortures so horrible that every instant appeared an age and she felt as if she must either give vent to her excruciating sensations in a piercing scream or else be suffocated by the endeavour to subdue her emotions.

"How are you, ma'am?" said Mobbs in his usual growling tone. "Come here, you ugly thief—will ye?" he cried, thus elegantly apostrophizing his dog, and bestowing a kick on the animal at the same time: then, closing the parlour door, he advanced into the room and took a seat near the fire, saying, as he chucked his hat upon the carpet, "It's a cold night, ma'am."

"Then you shall take something nice and warm, Mr. Mobbs, to comfort you," exclaimed the milliner,

slightly gathering courage from the familiarity of his conduct; but as she placed the spirit-bottles upon the table, her hand shook visibly and her whole frame trembled with the same nervous agitation.

"Thank'ee, ma'am—I'll help myself to a drop of brandy," said Mobbs; and as he spoke he more than half filled a tumbler with the potent spirit, adding a very moderate quantity of hot water and thrusting his dirty fingers into the sugar-basin to extract a couple of the largest lumps.

"And now what has brought you hither this evening, Mr. Mobbs?" inquired the milliner, affecting to be busily employed in snuffing the candles in order that she might avert her countenance as she spoke: then, although the words half suffocated her to give utterance to them, she said, "Any tidings of your friend Mr. Grumley?"

"Well—not exactly, ma'am," returned Mobbs, exhaling that peculiar sigh of pleasure which with many persons follows a draught of some strong and agreeable beverage: "leastways I can't say as yet——"

"Ah! then you think you have obtained some clue respecting him?" cried Mrs. Brace, still keeping her countenance turned from Mobbs: for she *felt* that the agonies of her suspense might be read in the workings of her features.

"Well—to speak candidly, I think I have, ma'am," said Mobbs: and he emptied his tumbler.

"Won't you take some more? Pray help yourself, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the milliner, assuming her most winning tone: and, turning towards him, she threw her agitated looks upon his countenance.

"Thank'ee, ma'am—I'll help myself," he said, meeting her glance and observing that she recoiled from it with a shrinking that extended to her innermost being. "But you was asking me about Grumley—poor Peter Grumley," he continued, in his cold implacable voice; "and I was telling you as how I had obtained, or fancied I'd obtained a clue to him."

"And knowing that I felt interested in the matter, you kindly came to acquaint me with the circumstance—is it not so?" said the milliner, nerving herself with that desperate courage which seeks a relief from suspense even at the risk of learning the worst at once.

"Well, ma'am—I can't exactly say it was in such a humour that I called to-night," responded Mobbs, again fixing his eyes most suspiciously upon her: "for the truth is—and the truth may be as well told at once——"

"Oh! certainly," cried the woman, sinking upon a chair with a feeling as if her senses were abandoning her. "The truth——"

"Is that I have reasons to entertain suspicions, ma'am," continued Mobbs, leaning forward as he spoke.

"Ah! suspicions—is it possible?" murmured Mrs. Brace, in a dying tone.

"Yes—suspicions of the strongest nature," proceeded Mobbs, his tone and looks every instant becoming more ominous.

"Against whom?" gasped the milliner, as if her very life depended upon the answer.

"Against *you!*" was the terrific response.

A strong spasm shook the wretched woman from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet—and the natural colour quitting her cheeks and leaving the rouge upon the marble flesh, rendered her positively ghastly. Her livid lips moved quiveringly with the vain attempt to articulate a few words: her voice remained as it were in her throat, held back by an irresistible weight and accompanied by a suffocating sensation. Frozen with dread horror—struck motionless by a tremendous consternation, she sate gazing with haggard eyes upon that ill-looking countenance which was opposite to her, and on which she read an expression of mingled malignity and fiendish cunning.

Ineffable was the anguish endured by the milliner for upwards of a minute! Whole ages of excruciating torture seemed to be condensed into that space. Though awfully aware of the necessity of saying something in reply to the terrific accusation made against her, she could not give utterance to a word; —and though equally alive to the appalling fact that her looks were confirming all the man's suspicions, she was utterly unable to compose her features or even assume the most distant semblance of outraged innocence.

A far less intelligent man than Mobbs would have read *guilt* written on her features, proclaimed by her looks, and apparent in her manner, as plainly as if the word were stamped with a searing-iron upon her brow. He was accordingly convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that the Gallows' Widow had placed him upon the right scent: but he did not wish to act with a precipitation that should lead to an immediate explosion. Indeed, it formed no part of his plan to urge matters to an exposure at all; and therefore he did not contemplate extreme measures with regard to the unhappy woman. He knew that she was rich; and it had been already settled between himself, the Gallows' Widow, and Carrotty Poll, that the knowledge of Mrs. Brace's tremendous secret should be made the means of extorting considerable sums of money from her. This was a game which suited Mr. Mobbs much better than getting himself restored to office by giving publicity to the murder and thereby explaining the real cause of Grumley's disappearance. Therefore, what he now aimed at was to penetrate into the very depths of the milliner's secret and ascertain how she had disposed of the corpse of her victim,—so that he might get her completely into his power and make her purse a constant source of supply for his own behoof by holding her crime in terror over her head.

Such were the man's calculations;—and accordingly, when he had suffered her to endure all the poignancy of that alarm which was certain to render her as docile and submissive as his purposes required, he said in a tone through which he only suffered his meaning to penetrate dimly and ambiguously, "You see, ma'am, that it's of no use to deny the thing—and therefore you'd better make a friend of me."

The milliner started as if from a hideous dream. For her imagination, so intensely tortured, had pictured nothing less than the very worst—her immediate arrest, a full exposure, the horrors of Newgate, and all the consecutive details usually resulting from the discovery of so heinous a crime. But in the words which suddenly broke upon her ears through this awful vision, she beheld a gleam of hope; and instantaneously catching at it with the feverish haste of desperation, even though it should prove only a straw, she said, "What mean you? Explain yourself! How can you serve me as a friend?"

"By not becoming your enemy, to be sure," was the immediate response. "As matters now stand, it is in my power to give you into custody on suspicion of having made away with Peter Grumley——"

"But you will not do so, Mr. Mobbs?—you will not ruin me?" murmured the wretched woman, the words escaping through the chattering of her teeth, and her voice trembling as fearfully as her body.

"Well, ma'am, it would be a pity to send such a handsome creatur' to the scaffold," said the man coolly.

"O God! do not allude to such a horror!" cried Mrs. Brace in an almost shrieking tone;—and falling upon her knees at his feet, the elegant milliner humbled herself like the veriest mendicant to that ill-looking, vulgar, gross-minded ruffian who was himself an assassin—yes, the assassin of his wife and his children!

"Come, get up, ma'am—get up," he said: "it will be your own fault if I hurt you. I'm sure I don't want to make a disturbance about this business —although it's a wery orkard one——"

"Is it possible to hush it up?—can money purchase your silence?" inquired the milliner, with an hysterical rapidity of tone, as she sprang from her knees and joined her hands imploringly.

"Well—I dare say we shall be able to come to an understanding, my dear madam," said Mobbs, whose familiarity, which at any other time would have been odious and disgusting to a degree, was now welcomed as a proof of good feeling. "But before we touch on that part of the business, I must know everything."

"Everything?" repeated Mrs. Brace, now wondering for the first time how much he did already know and whence that knowledge was gleaned: and at the same time it struck her that if she had denied the accusation at the very outset and acted with a fortitude proper to the emergency, she would not now be in the power of an unprincipled villain.

"Yes—you must tell me everything," repeated

Mobbs, with a savage emphasis: for he understood all the thoughts that had just traversed her mind. "And you need not fancy that you can baffle me——"

"Oh! no—no—I do not entertain such an idea," said the wretched woman, now perceiving that it was too late to assume the air of innocence and the tone of bravado. "I am at your mercy—and you can deal with me as you choose."

"That's talking more sensible," observed Mobbs. "And now, ma'am," he said, abruptly rising from his seat, "you'll be so kind as to show me where you've deposited the dead body of my poor friend."

"Ah! you wish to ruin me—you mean to expose me!" cried the miserable Mrs. Brace, an ice-chill striking to her very heart's core. "My God! my God!" she exclaimed in a frenzied tone, and pressing both her hands to her throbbing brows: "what will become of me?"

"You will ruin and expose yourself if you go on in this manner," said Mobbs, brutally. "Do you want to alarm the whole house? I tell you that I will befriend you if you do as I dictate: but if not——"

"My God! I will not irritate you any more—I will be obedient—passive—docile," murmured the unhappy woman, her teeth chattering with the intense chill of the tremor that was upon her, although the atmosphere of the room was agreeably warm. "What do you require, Mr. Mobbs?—speak—I am at your orders."

"It is now half-past eleven o'clock," said the man, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel; "and I suppose all your people are pretty well in bed or soon will be. It won't therefore be causing any suspicion if you'll just quietly take a candle in your hand and show me where my poor friend's body is hid. I don't want to know for any reason prejudicial to you—but merely for satisfaction's sake."

"And you will not use the evidence against me?—you will not destroy me?" asked Mrs. Brace, still shuddering visibly.

"If I wanted to do you a mischief, I have sufficient grounds on which to act as matters now stand," replied Mobbs; "and if I had meant it from the very first, I should have arrested you at once. Now do you understand?—and will you be satisfied?"

"Yes—yes—I am satisfied," said the miserable woman.

"Then make haste—take the candle—and do as I bid you," returned Mobbs.

"But if any of my servants should be below?" said Mrs. Brace, in nervous alarm.

"Ah! it's *below*, is it?" muttered Mobbs. "Well," he exclaimed, "go and get your people out of the way—and I'll take a drop more brandy during your absence."

This permission to quit his company and go about as she liked, unwatched and unattended, did more in a single instant to revive Mrs. Brace's courage and inspire her with confidence, than all the man's oaths, promises, and protestations of secrecy, silence, and friendship, could have done in an hour. A gleam of animation even came back to her countenance and a faint smile appeared upon her lips—so immense was the relief she thus suddenly experienced.

Issuing from the parlour, she descended to the servants' hall, where she found Frederick Dray and Harriet in earnest conversation together—the other domestics having retired to rest.

The handsome footman and the pretty lady's-maid were evidently in a state of much uneasiness and alarm; and they were wondering together what could possibly keep Mr. Mobbs so long with their mistress, when this lady herself entered the servants' hall.

"O madam!" exclaimed Harriet, running towards her: "we are so terribly frightened? What does he want?—and is he gone?"

"No—he is not gone," hastily responded Mrs. Brace: "but you have nothing to fear."

"God be thanked!" murmured Harriet, almost fainting with the sudden rebound that her heart gave when thus released from the appalling suspense that had previously held every chord tightened to the extremest tension.

"No—you have nothing to fear," resumed the milliner, in the same quick and excited tone as before: "nevertheless, he knows all — everything——"

"Perdition!" ejaculated Frederick Dray.

"O God!" murmured Harriet, now sinking helplessly upon a chair.

"Yes—he knows everything," continued Mrs. Brace: "but he will not betray us—he will accept a bribe—he will befriend us—and he insists upon my showing him the spot where the body is buried."

"Ah! then he means treachery of some kind—either for now or hereafter," said Frederick Dray: "but I will forestall him," he added, his countenance suddenly expressing a terrible resolution.

"What mean you, my good fellow?" demanded Mrs. Brace, in a whispering tone: but the sinister light which all on a sudden flamed up in her eyes, the ominous contraction of her brow, and the nervous trepidation which shook her entire form, showed plainly enough that she already understood Frederick Dray full well.

"You know what I mean, ma'am," he said, his voice becoming low and thick: and having glanced towards Harriet to assure himself that she did not overhear what was now passing, he fixed his eyes with a bold intelligence upon the countenance of his mistress.

"Yes—I *do* understand you, Frederick," she murmured. "But, my God!—is it necessary—this additional crime——"

"It *is* necessary," answered Dray. "Bring the villain down into the back kitchen—tell him what tale you will—and as he *returns*——mind, as he returns, I say——I shall spring upon him from the pantry. But you must hasten back to him for fear he should suspect a plant—and in the meantime I will get that girl up to her own room," he added, pointing to Harriet, who was sitting, or rather lying back half-fainting in an arm-chair.

"Be it all as you say, Frederick," observed Mrs. Brace: and she turned hastily away in order to avoid meeting his looks once more—for it seemed as if there were murder in them!

But during the minute she took to retrace her way to the parlour, Mrs. Brace appeared to obtain a wonderful familiarity with crime, as if by the sudden inspiration of Satan;—and ceasing almost instantaneously to look with horror upon another murder, she was led to contemplate it as a necessity, and then to rejoice at the idea as a means of ensuring her safety in future.

In this last-mentioned state of mind was it that

she once more stood in the presence of Mobbs, who was just emptying his tumbler as she opened the door.

"Well—is all quiet *below?*" he demanded significantly.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Brace. "Two of the domestics were sitting up: but I sent them to their respective chambers. You may come now, Mr. Mobbs, if you please."

"Lead the way, ma'am—and I'll follow," said the ex-constable. "Come, Toby, you ugly blackguard."

These last words were addressed to his dog, which kept close at his master's heels, as the master himself followed Mrs. Brace, who carried a candle in her hand.

Down to the lower regions of the spacious dwelling they descended; and on reaching the bottom of the stairs, Mrs. Brace paused for a moment under pretext of trimming with a pin the flaring wick of the candle—but really to subdue the sudden feeling of horror which sprang up in her mind as she felt that she was now standing as it were upon the threshold of a new crime. For from the short passage leading to the back kitchen did the pantry open on the right hand; and the woman knew that Frederick Dray was concealed *there* with a murderous intent.

"Be quiet, Toby!" exclaimed Mobbs, in a savage tone to the dog, which was beginning to give vent to a low and peculiar growl in which there was also something plaintive, as if the animal's instinct were already receiving some strange and mysterious attraction towards the spot where murder's dire work was concealed. "Come along, ma'am," said the ex-constable, turning towards Mrs. Brace: "for if you don't act as a guide, this beast will."

The milliner shuddered with a profound sensation of horror: for it seemed to her as if the very instinct of animals were sublimated to the degree of refinement necessary to espy, accuse, and expose the perpetrator of the foul crime of murder!

But gathering all the remains of that moral energy which had been so terribly shaken within the last hour, Mrs. Brace led the way along the passage; and it was a respite to this miserable woman to reflect that *the new crime* was not to be perpetrated until she and Mobbs should be retracing their way *back* from the spot where the murdered victim lay. Thus, even while she had hardened her soul to contemplate the death of her companion as an imperious necessity, she nevertheless experienced an immense relief in the postponement of the fatal instant even for a few minutes!

The passage was threaded: she strained her ears —Oh! how tensely she strained them to catch a sound—the slightest—that might assure her whether Frederick Dray was in the pantry or not;—but all was still in that direction!

She now threw open the door of the back kitchen: but so hideous a sensation of terror once more seized upon her as her eyes fell on the stone that covered the unblest grave of the corpse, that she staggered on the threshold and leant against the door-post for support.

"Ah! I understand," muttered Mobbs, in a tone which would have been inaudible under any less momentous circumstances, but which was as easily heard as the roar of a cannon now that every one of the wretched woman's senses was strung to the extremest tension.

"My God! my God!" she murmured, her teeth chattering and her knees knocking together.

"Come, ma'am—don't take on like this," said Mobbs, gradually divesting himself of his wonted brutality of manner in proportion as he found her getting deeper and deeper into his power: "the thing's done and can't be helped now. So we must make the best of it."

What Mr. Mobbs meant by making the best of a murder, we must leave our readers to judge for themselves; certain however it was that the remark carried a sort of philosophical, or rather desperate consolation to the mind of Mrs. Brace—and she said in a tone of reviving assurance, "You speak truly enough, heaven knows, Mr. Mobbs. But would to God that it had never happened!" she added with the most unfeigned—the most heartfelt sincerity.

"There, ma'am—you see it's just as I told you," observed the ex-constable, pointing towards the dog, who was smelling round *the* very identical stone and giving vent at the same time to a low and hideous sound which can only be described as a subdued moaning howl: "that there animal is as sagacious as a Christian—and I needn't ask *where* my partner has been buried."

Mrs. Brace was about to remind the ex-constable for the tenth time of his promise not to betray her, when she suddenly remembered that the reiteration of the pledge on his part was unnecessary, inasmuch as Frederick Dray was no doubt lying in ambush to silence his lips for ever; and now that she had conquered the first feeling of terror and consternation on revisiting the spot where her victim lay buried, she derived a sudden and strange hardihood from the thought that a *second* crime was about to render the *first* one as safe as it could possibly be made.

But scarcely had this reflection braced her mind with that unnatural courage,—scarcely, too, had Mobbs entered the back kitchen and begun to gaze upon the stone beneath which his murdered superior lay,—when they were both startled by piercing screams which appeared to come from above and penetrate through the floor, and wall, and chamber after chamber, down unto that lowest region of the milliner's establishment.

For a few moments Mobbs paused and listened with breathless attention—as if all his thoughts were in an instant diverted from the murder to this new and suddenly transpiring subject of interest: then, as the shrieks continued in louder waves of thrilling, rending, agonising sound, he yielded to the impulse of his own instincts—and, forgetting that he was no longer a constable nor bound to take notice of any such occurrence, he snatched the candle from Mrs. Brace's hand and darted away like one demented, with the dog at his heels.

So sudden was this movement on his part that the rush which he made along the passage struck a panic to the heart and paralyzed the arm of Frederick Dray, who had been holding himself in readiness to spring forth from the pantry; and the club which he had provided for his murderous purpose fell from his grasp.

As for Mrs. Brace, she stood petrified and stricken dumb for a moment,—inasmuch as she suspected only too well whence those rending shrieks emanated, and she was transfixed by the idea of such a ruffian as Mobbs interfering in the matter: but almost at the very next instant the appalling, maddening, hor-

rifying reminiscence shot through her brain that she was now *alone* in the sepulchre of her murdered victim,—and, as the light was rapidly disappearing, she rushed forth from the back kitchen with a shriek of mortal agony.

At the same moment Frederick Dray, having recovered his presence of mind, emerged from the pantry; and the wretched woman, sinking beneath the weight of accumulating misfortunes, threw herself into his arms and fainted. The next instant the light disappeared and total darkness prevailed in that place;—for Mobbs had already gained the top of the staircase leading to the ground-floor—and he had taken the candle with him!

The shrieks continued: he paused for a moment to listen—and his quick ear informed him that they came from premises *behind* those where he now was. A passage leading in that direction met his view—and he rushed along it, shading the light with his hand in order to protect it from the current of air which his rapid progress created. A door barred his way—but it opened to his touch; and, entering another passage, he instantaneously perceived that he had thus forced his way into the house which was at the back of Mrs. Brace's, but the front of which he knew must look upon St. James's Square. The discovery that the two dwellings thus communicated, excited his curiosity, thereby forming an additional impulse to urge him on. At the end of this second passage a door opened into a hall lighted by a lamp, and where a footman was seated in a lounging posture, his whole aspect and manner denoting the most supreme indifference to the sounds of anguish which still came with piercing note from above.

"Holloa! who are you, and what the devil do you want?" cried the footman, now starting to his feet as Mobbs rushed into the hall, followed by his dog.

"Don't you hear that row, you cursed sleepy fool?" demanded the ex-constable savagely;—and, without pausing to hear the flunkey's reply, he sprang up the handsomely-carpetted and well-lighted staircase,—the mongrel keeping close at his heels.

Suddenly the shrieking ceased—but not before the keen and experienced ear of Mobbs had caught the direction whence it came;—and, guided by that clue, he unhesitatingly burst open the door facing the head of the staircase.

"Damnation! what means this intrusion?" demanded a fine, tall, portly man dressed in a Turkish costume, and who held in his arms the senseless form of a lovely creature attired in the picturesque garb of a Flower Girl.

"Why, that rape and ravishment and all kinds of things are going on here," said Mobbs;—"and it's my dooty to perwent them," he added, still forgetting that he was no longer a peace-officer, but obeying the impulse of those habits which had become second nature.

Then, as he thus spoke, he flung aside the candle which he had brought with him, and seizing the Prince of Wales with his right hand, he swung him completely round, while with his left arm he tore the senseless Pauline from the royal voluptuary's embrace.

At the same moment the dog, naturally regarding the Prince as some enemy of his master's and therefore deeming it right and proper to take a due share in the proceedings, flew at the royal legs and began snapping and barking in a most disrespectful manner at the heels and ankles of the heir-apparent to the British throne!

"Call off your cur, you damned rascal!" cried the Prince, exasperated almost to madness, as he danced about to avoid the teeth of the annoying mongrel. "Do you hear me, sir?—call off your dog! By the living God——But perhaps you do not know who I am?"

"Some swell-mob scoundrel dressed up in masquerade toggery," said Mobbs, who at that moment was conveying Pauline Clarendon to a sofa—the disturbance having startled her from the deep sweon into which she had fallen.

But springing to her feet, the beauteous maiden threw a rapid glance around; and finding herself freed from the odious embraces of her royal tormentor, she paused not to reflect how she had been delivered nor even to thank her deliverer;—but, obedient to the impulse of the terrors consequent on the startling manner in which she had been awakened, she darted from the room.

"Stop her! stop her, I command you!" cried the Prince of Wales, no longer able to control either his words or his actions: and he rushed after the flying damsel.

"At him, Toby!" ejaculated Mobbs;—and in a moment the teeth of the dog were fixed in the heir-apparent's right leg.

And the heir-apparent,—Oh! crowning ignominy! roared most lustily, while Pauline Clarendon, snatching up her cloak on the landing, bounded along—descended the stairs half-a-dozen at a time—and, opening the front door, rushed from the house. For the hall was empty, the footman whom Mobbs had encountered there, having hastened into the other house to alarm Mrs. Brace with the intelligence that a rough-looking fellow with a mongrel dog had invaded the sanctity of that portion of the establishment which was devoted to "fashionable accommodation."

In the meantime Mobbs had called off his dog; and the Prince of Wales, throwing himself exhausted and bleeding upon a sofa, was about to overwhelm the ex-constable with the astounding revelation of his name and rank, when even through the turmoil of his enraged feelings flashed (like lightning through the stormiest clouds) the conviction that he would only be covering himself with ridicule and enhancing his humiliation to the extremest verge were he to inform that sordid-looking, coarse, and ungainly ruffian who he really was.

"Ah! it's all wery well to lie there kicking up that infernal row," said Mobbs, who, although he had seen the Prince of Wales more than once in his life, did not recognise him in the masquerading garb: "but you've nobody to thank for all this but yourself. What the devil! are the king's lieges to be raped and ravished by such disguised mahogany-jumpers as you, in spite of their cries and screams? I shouldn't be doing my dooty as a Bow Street runner——"

And then Mr. Mobbs suddenly stopped short: for the remembrance flashed to his mind that he was no longer in the service of the peace.

"Ah! you're an officer—are you?" said his Royal Highness, who, despite the bitter annoyance which he felt and the pain which his lacerated leg was causing him, nevertheless perceived the imperious necessity of extricating himself as promptly and also as quietly as he could from the present dilemma.

"Well, I dare say you know what it is to let a gentleman escape out of a difficulty by means of a golden key; and as the girl has come to no harm, it would be useless for you to carry the matter any farther. There—take those ten guineas and be off. You've done me quite mischief enough already—or rather your dog has," added the Prince, with a suppressed moan, as he tied his handkerchief round the wounded limb.

"Well, sir, I'm sure I don't want to make things more uncomfortabler than they are at present," said Mobbs, picking up with ill-concealed satisfaction the gold pieces which his Royal Highness threw down upon a table. "But you must know that if gentlemen like you will get into scrapes, they stand the chance of bringing the law about their ears."

"I paid you to take your departure, and not to remain here lecturing me," said the Prince, with all the dignified hauteur that was natural to him. "But stay—one moment," he cried, a sudden idea striking him: "how came you to burst into this room?—or rather, how was it that you were in the house at all?"

"I'd better leave it to this good lady to explain to you, sir," remarked Mobbs, pointing towards Mrs. Brace, who at the moment hurried into the room, followed by Frederick Dray and the other footman.

"Hush!" said the Prince, placing his finger upon his lip to warn the milliner not to utter a word which might make known his rank to Mobbs: for he saw by the agitation and dismay which her entire appearance exhibited that it was more than probable she might blurt forth something calculated to betray his incognito.

"I will call again to-morrow night. In the meantime you've nothing to fear, ma'am," hastily whispered the ex-constable as he passed by the milliner; —and, calling his dog to follow him, he took his departure, well pleased with the result of the adventure and chinking the gold in his pocket.

"You may retire," said the milliner to Frederick Dray and the other footman: then, the moment they had left the room, she turned towards the Prince, exclaiming, "My God! what has happened? But it was not my fault—you cannot blame me——Oh! I am going mad—mad!"

And flinging herself upon a chair, she pressed her hands to her throbbing brows, as if she could thereby steady her reason which she felt to be rocking upon its throne.

"What in the devil's name is the matter with you?" demanded the Prince, who was glad to find a vent for his execrable ill-humour even though it were against a poor defenceless woman—and that woman the pander to his vile pleasures. "Did that Bow Street runner come to make inquiries concerning the Magsman your husband?—or how was it that such an ill-looking ruffian came to be in the house at this time of night?"

"Mr. Harley—your Royal Highness—this is cruel —ungenerous—unkind to a degree," sobbed the wretched milliner. "I—I—do not deserve—such—such—treatment at your hands;"—and then she burst into a flood of tears.

"Come, Fanny—this is stupid," said the Prince, somewhat mollified by her grief. "I spoke hastily —and unkindly, I will admit: but when one has been interrupted just at the moment of success with a lovely creature—then subjected to the brutal insults of a low ruffian—next bitten in the leg by an accursed dog that may be mad for anything I know to the contrary——"

"Bitten—by a dog!" screamed Mrs. Brace, starting to her feet and surveying the Prince with dismay. "Oh! is this possible?"

"Quite possible—inasmuch as it has happened," said the heir-apparent, pointing to the bandage on his leg. "But I will hasten home and get Dr. Somers to look to it at once. Relieve me from suspense, however, before I take my departure—and tell me how that man came to burst into the room: for surely the girl's screams could not have been heard in St. James's Square?"

"No—no," responded the milliner hastily. "The officer came on a little business of his own—to—to —in fine, to receive some money for the affair of Caroline Walters;—and being in the other house, he heard the shrieks——"

"Enough, enough," exclaimed the Prince. "I am satisfied now. He did not recognise me—and I gave him ten guineas to go away quietly. But I was fearful that if the girl's screams had been heard outside, a crowd might have collected. Your explanation has however put my mind at rest on that head. And now, my dear Fanny, forgive me for what I said just now—and don't think the worse of your old friend on account of a passing petulance on his part. Come—one kiss—and then I will take my departure."

But as the milliner raised her countenance towards the Prince, he perceived that it was haggard and had a ghastly look; and fixing his eyes more intently upon her, he saw that the traces of profound horror and bitter grief were upon every lineament, despite her endeavours to assume a composed aspect.

"What in the name of heaven is the matter with you?" inquired the Prince, somewhat alarmed, inasmuch as there were so many of his own little affairs mixed up with those of Mrs. Brace that he did not know how far her present cause of annoyance might affect himself. "Tell me, Fanny—what is the matter with you?" he repeated, more emphatically still.

"Nothing—nothing—I can assure you," she answered. "Only the events of the last few days—Rose Foster's affair—that of Caroline Walters—and now the alarm of this night,—all these have unstrung my nerves."

"Well, you must take courage and console yourself," said the Prince, not for an instant suspecting that anything more serious than the circumstances she had enumerated was preying upon her mind. "And now good night. I myself am infernally vexed at the issue of the adventure with Pauline Clarendon——"

"Pauline Clarendon!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, forgetting for a moment all the causes of her own affliction in the amazement with which the Prince's words had filled her.

"Well—since I inadvertently let the name escape me," he observed, with a smile, "I shall not attempt to conceal the truth. Besides, I may require your assistance in the matter——"

"And that was Pauline Clarendon whom you brought hither just now?" remarked the milliner, still under the influence of a profound and somewhat painful surprise. "What—is it possible that the amour with her unfortunate sister did not cause both you and me sufficient alarm——"

"My dear Fanny," interrupted the Prince, in a resolute tone, "it is useless to remonstrate! When I came in so hurried a manner to you just now and told you that I had seen the loveliest figure in the whole world at the masquerade and that Germain was about to bring the unknown hither, I declared that I was already maddened by the elegance, grace, and virgin freshness of that transcendent form. I was then utterly ignorant who the Flower Girl could be: but when she revealed her countenance in this room—Oh! then never did Pauline appear so ravishingly beautiful! A thousand charms on no former occasion observed by me, were instantaneously discovered—and she struck me as being more lovely than Octavia. Think you, then, that I will abandon the hope of this conquest?—think you that I will renounce my pursuit of her? No—no—a hundred thousand times no! And it was also because she was haughty and reproachful—because she looked daggers at me with her magnificent eyes—and because she darted forth galling arrows in the shape of words from between the parting roses of her lips,—aye, it is also on this account that I will wage war against her stubborn virtue, so that my vengeance and my bliss shall be crowned with triumph at the same moment! Seek not therefore to turn me from my purpose: but on the contrary, prepare to lend me your aid when I may require it. And now once more good night."

Thus speaking, the Prince quitted the room; and muffling himself up in an ample cloak, he returned on foot to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CXLVII

THE BOUDOIR OF LOVE AND MYSTERY.

We must now return to Lord Montgomery and the Circassian Slave whom we left at the moment when the latter introduced the former into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed.

Quitting her hold upon the nobleman's hand, his fair companion locked the door; and he heard her take out the key, which she deposited somewhere in the room. She then bade him remove the handkerchief from around his head and throw off his mask and domino; and when he had done this, he found, as of course he had expected, that the chamber was involved in the most pitchy darkness.

That this was the same room of which Lord Florimel had spoken, Montgomery felt convinced the instant that he set foot in it: for the approaches to it were precisely the same, as detailed in italic at the close of the hundred and forty-sixth chapter; and he speedily found that not only was it furnished in a most luxurious manner, but that certain articles of furniture were precisely the same as his noble friend had represented. That is to say, *the table stood between the sofa and the bed; and near the head of the bed there was a large arm-chair.*

"Seat yourself by my side, dear Eugene," said the lady, in the most tender cadence of her melting and musical voice, taking his hand at the same time and thus bringing him close to her upon the sofa: then throwing her arms about his neck, she drew him towards her and their lips met again in a long, burning kiss.

"Dearest, dearest lady," exclaimed the nobleman, a flood of rapture pouring in unto his soul; "what earthly happiness can compare with this?"

And then, as one arm clasped her supple, yielding, and luxurious form, he passed his right hand caressingly over her countenance, and he could tell by the touch that her features were beautifully formed, while her cheeks were of velvet softness in one sense and plump and firm in another. Her breath was as fragrant as the zephyr which passes over the sweetest flowers; and he had already observed beneath her mask, when in the theatre, that her teeth were white as pearls and faultlessly even.

"Now tell me candidly, my dear Eugene," she observed as her head reposed upon his shoulder,—"tell me what you think of the woman who could so far forget herself as to become the heroine of such an adventure as this whereof you yourself are the hero."

"I was about to reply, my charming friend," said Montgomery, "that the intoxication of the happiness which I experience leaves no leisure for reflection, and indeed that I have no wish to think of anything save the ineffable delight which I enjoy in your society. But your question has forced the subject upon my thoughts; and I will candidly declare that I consider you to be wise in following the dictates of your feelings and the impulse of your tenderest passions in strewing the rugged paths of this world with as many flowers as possible. You are formed for love and pleasure:—Oh! yes—your nature and your person are alike glowing with raptures, to experience and to impart them! And I love you—I swear by everything sacred that I love you—and perhaps all the more fervently, all the more madly, because of this mystery with which you envelop yourself and which constitutes an additional charm."

"You love me—you love me," murmured the impassioned woman, yielding herself unresistingly to the caresses which the nobleman lavished upon her and courting the voluptuous toyings in which he indulged; "but of what nature is this love, Eugene? Oh! do not deceive me—but confess that it is the mere excitement of the imagination and the passions—an excitement that will leave no durable sentiment behind!"

"On the contrary, my dearest unknown," exclaimed Montgomery, speaking with fervour and straining her passionately in his embrace,—"I shall never, never forget these moments of love so ineffably delicious and so truly elysian! Ah! if there were a light in this chamber, you could tell by my eyes—by my whole countenance—that I am speaking the truth: but even in the midst of this darkness may'st thou obtain a proof the strength of those emotions which I feel! There—place you hand upon my heart—does it not palpitate with the flutterings of a tenderness which is not altogether sensual? And even now, with the full enjoyment of bliss within my reach, do I prefer reclining with you for a time in this manner—my arm round your waist—your head upon my shoulder—your breath fanning my cheek—your bosom heaving against my chest—and your voice flowing in the sweetest melody upon my ears. Yes—there is sentiment in all this;—and where there is sentiment, something more permanent than a mere gross passion hath assuredly an existence. Again, it would be pouring gall into the cup of ambrosia of which I am now drinking such deep draughts, were you to tell me that this is the last time as well as the first that I am ever to enjoy so much happiness. I shall know not a greater joy than that of meeting you

again: I could know not a greater misery than that of being separated from you for ever. Now, then, adored lady—tell me whether you think I love you?"

"Yes—I believe that you experience an interest in me, Eugene," said the unknown, interrupting herself at every word to bestow upon him the tenderest kisses; "and I at once promise you that we shall meet again."

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks, sweet lady, for this assurance," cried the Earl, in unfeigned rapture. "But you will not allow too long an interval to elapse——"

"No," was the soft response: "for I myself shall be only too happy to renew the pleasures of this meeting."

"Then you love me, dear lady—you love me?" exclaimed Montgomery, in a tone evincing the anxiety with which he awaited her answer.

"Yes—I love you, Eugene," said the mysterious unknown; "for I now find that you are as amiable and agreeable as you are grandly handsome. And at some future meeting," she continued, in a still lower and softer tone, as if her entire being were melting under the influence of her emotions,—"at some future meeting it may be that I shall throw aside the mask of mystery and tell you who I am."

"Beloved friend," said the nobleman, "I care not who you may be, inasmuch as I adore you for yourself only—and whether you are a Duchess or a humble gentlewoman, my sentiments must ever remain the same. But there *does* exist a reason wherefore I should rejoice in the dissolution of the mystery which at present surrounds you—and that is because I should then behold with my eyes that countenance which I can only now contemplate with my imagination. On this account shall I hail with an indescribable ecstacy the moment when you may choose to place a full and complete confidence in me."

"And the arrival of that moment depends altogether upon yourself, Eugene," said the lady, one of her fair hands playing caressingly with his countenance.

"Upon myself!" he repeated. "Oh! explain the meaning of your words, my well-beloved—and teach me how I can merit your confidence."

"Listen to me, Eugene—and I will be candid with you," said the lady, in a tone of tender gravity. "The ardour of my temperament induces me to seek the pleasures of love in the manner which brought Lord Florimel to my arms, and which has this night thrown you and me together. I am unmarried—immensely rich—and entirely my own mistress. But you will ask wherefore I have not sought in marriage the legitimate gratification of my passions? In explanation I must inform you that I have ever held in abhorrence the idea of being chained to one individual; and moreover, knowing the frailty of my nature, I should have shrunk from the bare thought of becoming the wife of an honourable and perhaps kind-hearted and confiding man, to whom it would have been impossible for me to remain constant. Under all these circumstances I preferred the adoption of that luxurious, free, and unshackled existence which was led by the celebrated Manon Lescaut of France—with this difference, however, that whereas she threw neither veil nor gloss over her amours, I have hitherto concealed mine beneath that impenetrable mystery which hides my name, rank, and even personal identity at this very moment from yourself. Well, for some years have I led this life: and yet my lovers have been comparatively few—and those all selected according to the passing whim of a moment. Now, however, I begin to grow weary of that existence; and I experience the necessity of having some one whom I may love and by whom I shall be beloved. I do not think of marriage—no, not a whit more now than I did when first abandoning myself to this career of what may be termed mysterious voluptuousness. But I long to find a man who is handsome, elegant, and agreeable, and who possesses those honourable and delicate feelings that will render him silent as the tomb in respect to the real position in which he stands towards me. For the world believes me pure and virtuous—my name is untarnished—and my reputation is spotless as the mirror. To preserve this fair fame is naturally my object;—and therefore the man who secretly becomes my lover, must be one deserving the confidence reposed in him. For my *honour*—and in that word are also comprised my happiness and my very life—would be in his keeping; and before I can bring my mind to put so immense a trust in any human being, I must receive ample proofs of his worthiness. And here I will observe that so extraordinary are the precautions which I adopt to conceal my frailty from every eye, that not even the domestics who attended the carriage which brought you hither just now, suspect for a moment the real purpose of your coming. I shall not reveal to you the tale which I invent on such occasions and which they implicitly believe: suffice it to say that it is so feasible as to be convincing to them — and not a suspicion exists in their mind as to the purity of their mistress. Thus, my dear Eugene, you perceive that hitherto my amours have been conducted with a security and a safety which leave my reputation untainted; and I shall not lightly nor hastily break down a single one of all the defences and precautions with which I have surrounded my proceedings."

"And if I were to convince you, beloved lady," said Montgomery, who had listened in a strange kind of bewilderment to the singular avowals and explanations which were wafted to his ear in a voice of such melting softness,—"if I were to convince you that I am worthy of your confidence—that I possess those feelings of honour and delicacy which you described——"

"In that case, my handsome Eugene," exclaimed the unknown, in a voice that trembled with ecstatic emotions, while her whole frame vibrated beneath the same influence as she lay embraced in his arms, —"in that case, my handsome Eugene, you would only have to demand the revelation of my name and rank and to desire that the light of day should shine upon my countenance in your presence—and you would be gratified. For I may say with truth that I bear a proud name—and without vanity that I am beautiful!"

"But of what nature is the proof you require with regard to myself, dear lady?" asked Montgomery, his curiosity excited to an almost intolerable pitch.

"On that head, Eugene, I will give you some explanations," was the reply. "Know, then, that the man who would seek my confidence must begin by giving me his own; and to learn my secrets he must entrust me with all those which he cherishes in his own breast. He must unbosom himself entirely to me, even to the revelation of any little acts or deeds in his life on which he may look back with regret or

shame. And if his earlier years have been sullied by any crime, so much the better for the purpose we are now discussing."

"I do not comprehend you, mysterious being that you are!" exclaimed Lord Montgomery, a slight shudder passing through his frame.

"Oh! I will soon render myself intelligible, Eugene," she replied, mingling her words with caresses—as if she felt that he trembled and was anxious to reassure him. "For can you not understand that the individual who places himself as it were in my power, instantaneously and by virtue of that fact renders himself worthy to become the depositor of my secret? And therefore do I say that if he have committed some crime, it is all the better for such a purpose, inasmuch as if he confide his honour, his liberty, or his life to my keeping, I could not for a moment hesitate to entrust my reputation in his hands. A mutual necessity binds us to secrecy; and we have a reciprocal interest in shielding each other. For if the man whom I thus select as my lover has at any period of his life committed a deed which he would blush to avow or tremble to have made public,—be it swindling, rape, robbery, forgery, or even murder,—I should be all the more ready to trust him, and all the more confident in the safety of my secret. Nor should I love him the less: on the contrary, it would give me pleasure to sooth his wounded spirit—and even his remorse would recommend him the more closely to my affections, because I should rejoice in the fact that he was thus dependant upon me for solace and sympathy. If he were poor, or a spendthrift, I should likewise love him with the greater ardour, because I should feel that he was more completely *mine*, inasmuch as by placing the riches of my purse at his disposal I should ensure his gratitude and touch all the tenderest feelings of his nature. Now, therefore, my dear Eugene, you perceive that I am prepared to accept as a paramour a man whose name must be honour

able, though his private life be sullied,—a man who, like myself, can look the world in the face but who dares not take a survey of his own soul. In a word, such a man must first place himself entirely in my power, before I will consent to place myself in his; and he who will do this to prove his devotion, not only gains my love for evermore, but may likewise enjoy the use of those superfluous thousands which I now bestow upon thankless relatives or equivocal public institutions."

"I have dwelt with an interest the most profound, dear lady, upon every word which has fallen from your lips," said the nobleman, bewildered by her language and intoxicated by the fond ardour of her caresses; "and I now comprehend you fully. But suppose that I was to tell you, while becoming a candidate for your permanent love, that I have never committed a deed the revelation of which would place me in your power, and that I am therefore unable to give you the guarantees which you require."

"Were you to tell me this much, Eugene," replied the lady, in a tone of prompt decision, "I should not believe you—and indeed you would at once destroy all the confidence which I might be previously disposed to place in you. Because there breathes not a man who has devoted himself to pleasure and who is known to be extravagant and even profligate,—there breathes not such a man who can hold his head erect and proclaim himself sinless. No—it is impossible! And moreover, were you to dare breathe such an assertion in my ears, it would take the aspect of an insult: forasmuch as it would be contrasting your own vaunted virtue with my frailty and shame."

"Dearest lady, I do not pretend to be immaculate," said the Earl, lowering his voice to a whisper: "nay, more—I will even confess——"

"Ah! now you inspire me with an increasing confidence, Eugene—my handsome Eugene!" exclaimed the impassioned unknown; and fastening her lips to his mouth, she bestowed upon him so long, luxurious, and burning a kiss that his form quivered with a perfect frenzy of ecstatic sensations, and he experienced all the delicious ebriety of the soul's thrilling raptures. "Yes—now I begin to adore you, my Eugene," continued the Circassian Slave, her bosom heaving and falling with voluptuous tumult against his chest: "and I will make you the god of my worship—the idol of my devotion, if you have only the courage to gain my confidence. Oh! I already feel that we are destined to arrive at a full and complete understanding with each other;—and I now rejoice at the deception which you practised in order to take the place of your friend Florimel. For you, my Eugene, can appreciate the love and tenderness which I am prepared to bestow upon you, and which will place all I possess at your disposal! Yes—there is no sacrifice that I will not make for you, Eugene, in order to prove the strength—the ardour—the permanence of my attachment; and in return you will ever be as kind and amiable as you are now."

"Oh! every word you utter constitutes an irresistible temptation, syren that thou art!" murmured the nobleman, now intoxicated with passion and maddened with desire to a degree which rendered him reckless of everything in the whole world save the charming object of his present enthusiasm. "Never did I become so completely a prey to the witching influence of woman as I now am—never was I so utterly enthralled by the magic of her voice, the tender persuasiveness of her tongue, and the ardour of her caresses. Oh! to behold your countenance—to look into the depths of those eyes which must be so beautiful—to gaze upon the expressive softness of those features which are faultless even to the touch as I pass my hand over them—to behold the flush of love and pleasure upon your cheeks—and to *see* that bosom's heaving which I now *feel*,—Oh! what sacrifice would I not make—what price would I not pay? Yes—even if it were placing my more than honour—my very existence—in your power, I should not hesitate!"

"Then you do love me, Eugene—you love me, although you have not seen my face?" exclaimed the Circassian Slave, throwing fresh fervour if possible into her caresses and a more thrilling tenderness into her voice. "But I have already told you that I *am* beautiful—and it will be a proud moment for me when I can reveal my countenance to your eyes! Oh! *then*, I shall not fear the result of the impression which will be made upon you: on the contrary, I have vanity enough to believe that you will bless the day that gave such a mistress to your arms. Moreover,—and you will excuse me for again touching upon such a subject at such a moment,—I know that your resources have been well nigh absorbed by your love of pleasure and a ruinous law-suit; and it will be my joy and delight to bring back smiles to your lips by placing some fifteen or twenty thousand pounds in your hands. Yes—I have that sum at my disposal at the present time; and it is your's, Eugene—your's, as a small token of my love—as a proof of my confidence—as an earnest of that compact of affection and of a secret understanding which must henceforth bind us to each other. And think not, my handsome Eugene, that I shall prove a jealous mistress, or that any ridiculous whims or despotic exactions on my part will instil the least drop of gall into the cup of pleasure which we are to quaff with each other. No—my whole study shall be to ensure your happiness;—and if you choose to make some deserving woman the partner of your rank and fortune, I shall not regard her as a rival. Because I shall rest assured that you will still find a few occasional leisure moments to devote to one who has already conceived a sudden but not the less powerful affection for you, and who is disposed to make every sacrifice to ensure your felicity and retain your friendship until death."

There was something indescribably winning in the caresses that accompanied this persuasive appeal which went searchingly to the innermost depths of the nobleman's heart; and there was likewise something so mysteriously romantic and yet so full of truth and sincerity in the language and the manner in which the impassioned woman offered her love and her riches for the acceptance of that man whose ardent temperament made him rejoice at the possession of the former and whose almost beggared purse caused him to catch greedily at the latter,—there was something so strange, so full of a magic charm, so profoundly touching in all this, that the strongest mind would have yielded and the most suspicious nature would have given way. The reader will not therefore be surprised if Lord Montgomery surrendered himself, soul and body, to the ineffable witchery of that mysterious influence;—and anxious to behold the realisation of all that the enamoured lady had shadowed forth in language alike so tender and so glowing, he folded her in an

embrace full of enthusiastic feeling, exclaiming, "Oh! my adored unknown, let me at once prove myself worthy of your confidence!—let the delicious compact be sealed between us without another moment's delay!"

"Tell me, then, my handsome Eugene, all that concerns you," said the Circassian Slave, overwhelming him with the tenderest kisses and the most voluptuous toyings: "tell me the history of your life — unbosom every secret which your soul cherishes! Retrace your whole career — tremble not to expose its faults—shrink not from unveiling its deeper stains, if such there be. But act frankly and candidly towards me—make me your confidant and your friend — and all mystery shall then at once cease on my part!"

"Yes—I will place myself in your power, dearest lady — irresistible charmer!" said the Earl, in a stifling tone. "Oh! if you were Satan in disguise, luring me to destruction, I could not combat against the influence which you have acquired over me. My God! how I long to know who you are, woman of wondrous witchery and romantic mysteriousness that thou still art to me! But since it now depends upon myself to dissolve that spell which renders you thus unknown and your countenance invisible, I will not delay the talismanic conjuration which is to lighten this strange darkness. Give me thine ear, then, my well-beloved—and prepare to listen to things some of which will excite thy liveliest interest, and others make the blood curdle in thy veins!"

"Oh! tell me all that, my adored Eugene—my worshipped lover!" murmured the lady, pressing his hand passionately against her glowing bosom. "And think not that you will alarm or annoy me by any possible revelation which you can make: for I warn you that unless the promised confidence be so complete and in itself contain such facts as will place you thoroughly in my power, I shall not dare incur the risk of making myself known to you."

"God knows, thou syren," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, a rapid shudder passing over him — a shudder which she felt as she reclined in his arms, and which made her press even more closely still to his breast,—"God knows, thou syren, that I am about to place myself in thy power!"

And then, as if to escape from the thoughts which had for an instant disturbed him with so harrowing an effect, and fall back again into that ecstacy of feeling which bathed his whole soul in a fount of voluptuousness, he imprinted innumerable kisses on the smooth brow, the glowing cheeks, and the moist plump mouth of his companion;—and then, yielding to the torrent of emotions which, alike delirious and delicious in their intoxicating influence, bore him on as if in an irresistible whirl of pleasure, he began to breathe his promised confessions in the ear of the lady!

And then—in the deep Stygian darkness of that chamber—but in an atmosphere warm and perfumed,—with a splendid creature reclining in his arms, her whole form respiring soft and sensuous love, — in this manner did the nobleman, no longer the master of himself, but hurried on by a witching influence which he could not control—rendered insensate, too, and indifferent to all consequences save those which the syren herself had shadowed forth,—abandoning himself therefore to the spell which was upon him, and full of a fervent hope and a blind confidence,—in this manner was it, we say, that Lord Montgomery began to pour forth his revelations into the ears of the woman who had acquired so marvellous an ascendancy over him.

And she listened to the tale in the deepest silence, remaining almost motionless, too, in his arms the whole time, as if wrapped up in a breathless attention—save that now and then she pressed his hand with all the apparent ardour of the enthusiasm she had previously testified towards him: but when he paused, after having spoken for nearly a quarter of an hour in a low and murmuring though perfectly audible voice, she threw her arms around his neck—kissed him passionately—and exclaimed in a voice full of joyous excitement, "Oh! I thank thee for this confidence, my ever dear, dear Eugene!"

"And you are not ashamed of the man who is henceforth to be thy lover—thy paramour—thy friend?" said the Earl, his whole frame trembling with the ecstatic feelings which her ardour caused him to experience.

"Ashamed of you!" she repeated. "Oh! no—no—that were impossible! On the contrary, I adore you—I worship you, my handsome Eugene! For now I perceive that all the licentiousness—all the voluptuous profligacy of my own career, render me a fitting companion for thee. Ashamed of you!—Ah! should I not be also ashamed of myself, if I experienced such a feeling with regard to thee?"

"And yet you have heard all the cruelties I have practised towards the unhappy girls whom I have seduced at different times," said the nobleman; "how I have deserted them—suffered them to pine away in neglect or perish in poverty."

"Every man of pleasure has done the same," observed the lady.

"Then, too," he continued, "you have heard all the meannesses which I have practised at different times to raise money—aye, and the crimes too that I have committed—such as fraud upon my bankers—forgery with my discounters—and all the routine of those acts which men so frequently practise when driven to desperation by their pecuniary necessities."

"Yes—but you have passed through the ordeal without detection," said the Circassian Slave; "and in the presence of the world your name is as untarnished and your reputation as unsullied as ever it was. Oh! all that you have told me yet amounts to comparatively nothing when we thus examine it in detail;—and I still feel that my lascivious life stamps me with greater infamy than that which, so far as I am yet aware, could possibly attach itself to you. Proceed, therefore, my generous Eugene—my noble-hearted lover—and do not let me have to blush in your presence when I reveal my countenance. No—it is for you to prove yourself worse than I—and then away with the mystery that now surrounds me!"

"Well—I will proceed, my angel—I will tell you more——"

"Not *more*—but *all!*" interrupted the lady, with passionate vehemence. "Come—delay not—time is passing——"

"Oh! your anxiety to reach the end of this phase in our connexion is not greater than mine,

dearest unknown," exclaimed the Earl. "I will therefore at once resume my confessions by touching upon that law-suit in which I am engaged against the Marchioness of Belleuden. Do you know that lady?"

"I have seen her: but we are not acquainted," was the response; and the Circassian Slave pressed the nobleman's hand, as if to encourage him to proceed.

And he *did* proceed;—and, in thus continuing his narrative he spoke in a lower, deeper, and more solemn tone—as if his *words* were now *things*, and his language was conveying matters of the gravest import. And again in utter silence and with a respiration almost entirely suspended, did the lady listen to the revealings which grew more astounding—more awe-inspiring as they progressed;—until at last the nobleman breathed *one* fact—gave utterance to *one* circumstance which made her whole frame vibrate with a sudden tremor as she lay reclining in his arms. 'Twas as if a galvanic shock had been imparted all in a moment and unexpectedly;—and the Earl stopped short beneath the influence of a consternation which fell upon him with a similar abruptness.

"Ah! *now* you loathe—you abhor—you detest me," he exclaimed in a wild tone; "and I have said *too much!*"

"No—no, dearest Eugene—not a syllable too much!" hastily cried the Circassian Slave, starting up and for the tenth time throwing her arms about his neck and folding him in a fervid embrace. "I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice that you have done *that deed*—at least for one reason: because now I can look you without shame in the face—and moreover you have indeed placed yourself in my power. But such a noble confidence shall never, never be betrayed by me: on the contrary, I will cherish your secret as religiously as if it were mine own. And now you must give me all the details of that event, my Eugene—for it is invested with a thrilling and exciting interest!"

And the insensate nobleman—once again abandoning himself to that ecstacy of feeling in which the wiles, the witchery, and the fascination of this extraordinary woman appeared to be able to plunge him at will—continued to breathe in her ear the explanatory details which she sought, and to the narration of which she encouraged him by the tenderest caresses.

At length he ceased speaking—and every incident of his life was now made known to her!

"You have told me all, Eugene—you have told me all," she murmured, as seated upon his knees, with her arms round his neck, she lavished upon him such kisses that the very air of that dark chamber seemed filled with their fervour:—"you have told me all, and I thank you—Oh! I thank you from the bottom of my soul. But now let us seek the couch of love—and when the morning dawns, the sunbeams shall shine upon my countenance! Then will I reveal to you my name—and all the first conditions of our compact will be fulfilled!"

"Be it as you say, adorable woman!" exclaimed the Earl, maddened with desire;—and he covered her face with devouring kisses.

"Stay—we must seal our compact with wine as well as with love," said the lady, as if inspired with the sudden thought of enhancing the thrill of sensual longings by the influence of the generous grape: and reaching towards the table, but without quitting her position upon his knees, she felt with her fair hands for what she sought.

In a few moments the sharp sound of an exploding cork, followed by the hissing of effervescent wine and by the exhalation of a delicious aroma, made Lord Montgomery aware that it was in champagne the compact was to be ratified;—and immediately afterwards he felt a glass raised to his lips.

"I pledge thee, my Eugene," said the lady, "in the generous juice of Epernay—and long may the bond of our affection endure!"

"I pledge thee in return, my adorable unknown," exclaimed Montgomery; "and may death alone be enabled to quench the flame of that passion which we now cherish for each other!"

Having thus spoken, he drained the glass: but as he withdrew it from his lips, it fell from his hands—and a mortal terror suddenly seized upon him as he experienced a sensation of giddiness fasten on his brain as it were all in an instant. A cry of alarm escaped him—and the lady sprang from her seat upon his knees, her musical tones now sounding in a laugh of triumph. He endeavoured to raise himself from the sofa: but his limbs were heavy as lead—insensibility gained upon him—all his ideas fell suddenly into confusion—he heard nothing more—he felt nothing more—and the scene of mystery, and love, and romance terminated all in a moment in an utter blank!

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When Lord Montgomery awoke again to consciousness, the light was streaming in upon him from the window facing the couch in which he was lying. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Where was he? Why, assuredly in his own chamber in Grafton Street—in his own bed!

Then was it all a dream?—were all those circumstances which now came slowly back to his memory, mere incidents of a fantastic vision?—and had he been the prey of a delusion in which the Circassian Slave was a heroine supplied by his own over-heated imagination?

Yes—it must be so! And yet, as he raised himself up in his bed and looked all about the apartment with the bewilderment of one who knows not yet whether he be really awake or still dreaming, his eyes caught sight of the *blue domino* upon the chair by the side of the couch.

Unable to endure the agonising suspense which now seized upon him, he rang the bell violently.

The summons was almost immediately answered by his valet.

"Gilbert, what time was it when I came home last night?" demanded the nobleman, assuming a tone of indifference: for he did not choose his dependant to observe the excitement of feeling under which he was labouring.

"It was about two o'clock this morning, my lord," was the response.

"Ah!" was the Earl's involuntary ejaculation: for the conviction struck him, with the withering effect of lightning, that the adventures of the past night were indeed no dream. "Well—was I in rather a curious state?—or how was it?" he demanded impatiently.

"Since your lordship asks the question," said Gilbert, "I am bound to reply. The truth then is that your lordship was so exceedingly overcome by liquor as to be entirely insensible."

"And who was kind enough to bring me home?" inquired the nobleman, his heart sinking lower and lower every instant.

"Your lordship arrived in a carriage——"

"Whose carriage?" was the demand uttered with almost savage impatience.

"I do not know, my lord," returned Gilbert. "It was a plain one of dark colour——"

"Ah!" again ejaculated Montgomery, remembering a certain point in Florimel's narrative where *the* barouche was similarly described. "But go on. Who came with me?"

"A footman had charge of your lordship——"

"A tall man—a very tall man?" exclaimed the Earl, the fever of his impatience amounting almost to a frenzy.

"I believe he was, my lord," responded the valet: "but really I took little notice of him—unless it was to observe that he studiously averted his countenance from the light of the street-lamp, as he helped to lift your lordship out of the carriage."

"But did he say nothing?" demanded Montgomery.

"Merely that your lordship had indulged somewhat too freely where you had passed the evening," replied the valet. "The carriage immediately drove away, and I put your lordship to bed."

"You may retire," said the nobleman.

Gilbert accordingly withdrew; and the instant the door closed behind him, the unhappy Earl gave vent to his tortured feelings in a moan of indescribable anguish—and, burying his head in the pillows, he yielded to all the excruciating agonies of his terrible reflections.

For he now remembered that he had placed not only his honour, but his very life, in the hands of a woman totally unknown to him; and the termination of his interview with her was by no means of a reassuring nature. Indeed, it was impossible to blind himself to the damning fact that, with the most exquisite skill and a marvellous refinement of astuteness, she had succeeded in wheedling him out of secrets which might be used against him with an effect that he shuddered to contemplate.

Recoiling in horror from this stage of his agonising reflections, he cursed—Oh! how bitterly, bitterly he cursed his folly—his worse than folly—his madness—raving, stark, staring, incomprehensible madness—in divulging such tremendous secrets to an utter stranger. But the evil was done: it was irrevocable as are all deeds which belong to the past;—and like too many of those incidents in the life of man, it left behind bitter food for reflection.

CHAPTER CXLVIII.

THE PIOUS TRAVELLERS.

THE morning which followed the night of the masquerade and all the incidents resulting therefrom, was clear, bright, and beautiful.

At about half-past nine o'clock on this said agreeable morning, two individuals might have been observed riding quietly along the road running through Blackheath. One was mounted upon an animal which its proprietor no doubt called a horse: but it was the most wretched specimen of skin and bones that ever was compelled to perform active service instead of being immolated at a knackers' yard for the benefit of sausage-makers and purveyors of cats'-meat. The other individual was seated upon the back—or rather the hind-quarters of one of those useful but invariably ill-treated quadrupeds called donkeys; and instead of keeping by the side of his companion, he rode respectfully behind him.

But who are these travellers that must even at the first glance remind our readers so strongly of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza?—who are these wayfarers, mounted upon beasts that certainly might have a more comely appearance?

The one sitting so demurely on the back of the wretched Rozinante, is none other than our dearly-beloved friend the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby;—and the humble individual bestriding the noble ass, is his faithful follower, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

And if they were any other than two such highly respectable and soul-saving "vessels" we should be disposed to laugh heartily at the ridiculous figure which they both cut on the present occasion; but being the leaders of the New Lights, we must contemplate their progress with awe and record their adventures with as much gravity as we can command for the purpose. At the same time, we are bound to admit that there *was* considerable extenuation on behalf of the small boys who roared, and yelled, and hooted as the reverend travellers passed by the spots where they were playing: for Mr. Sneaksby had evidently put on his most pathetic air of sanctimonious misery and had screwed up his countenance to the extremest pitch of pious wretchedness—while Mr. Paxwax looked uncommonly like a man who, having been awfully drunk over-night, labours under the effect of an excruciating headache next morning and wears an aspect as doleful as if he were just going to be hanged.

Slowly did the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax journey along,—the horse on which the former was mounted, maintaining a shuffling, shambling pace, as if it were as pious as its rider and had a violent inclination to fall upon its knees—and the donkey jogging onward in a sullen, obstinate, dogged manner as if he had made up his mind that no earthly power should be able to impel him into an accelerated speed.

"Five miles have we ridden, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, at length breaking a long silence and glancing at a mile-stone as he spoke; "and verily it hath taken us two hours to achieve this much of our journey."

"Two mortal hours, Brother Sneaksby," answered Ichabod; "and, behold! my nether parts are already sorely inflamed by the unpleasant motion of this obstinate beast."

"Of a surety, when I behold the trouble which thine animal causeth thee, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, "I no longer marvel that Balaam should have been angered by his ass."

"And if Balaam had possessed a horse, he assuredly would not have ridden the ass," rejoined Mr Ichabod Paxwax, somewhat savagely.

"My dear brother, thou art impatient," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

"Why—when one is pretty well raw exactly where it is most inconvenient to be so," observed Ichabod, with continued acrimony in his tone, "it is enough to make him somewhat ruffled in his temper."

"Thou art deficient in grace, Brother Paxwax," said his leader, reproachfully.

"Verily, and it is rather a supply of grease which I need at this moment, Brother Sneaksby," retorted Ichabod.

"Dost thou turn my words to ridicule?" exclaimed the reverend gentleman, now speaking sharply himself. "Truly, and this is most disrespectful on thy part, Brother Paxwax: it is likewise unjust and unkind, seeing that I am in no way an accessory to the galling which thou receivest in the breech from the uncouth trotting of that animal. For when it was resolved by the Elders last evening that a deputation should repair to Dartford, and when you and I were requested to undertake that grave and solemn duty, thou didst of thine own accord declare thine intention of riding upon an ass as a proof of thy meekness and a sign of thy humility."

"Since we are alone together, Brother Sneaksby," observed Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, who was writhing miserably upon the saddle, and making the most awful contortions with his full-moon countenance,—"I will honestly and frankly confess that I chose this assinine mode of conveyance inasmuch as I am unaccustomed to bestride the nobler animal called a horse."

"And therefore you perceive, Brother Paxwax, that thy duplicity is deservedly punished," said Mr Sneaksby. "Thou didst arrogate to thyself meekness and humility in selecting the ass—and the hidden reason was thine incapacity to ride the horse. Dost thou know, Brother Paxwax, what the ungodly would call thee?"

"What?" demanded Ichabod.

"A humbug," replied his reverend leader.

"Then if the ungodly did," exclaimed Mr. Paxwax; "I would put off my coat—tuck up my shirt sleeves—and punch the ungodly's head."

"Oh! thou man of wrath!" ejaculated Mr. Sneaksby, dropping the reins and holding up his hands in sanctimonious horror at the warlike threat.

But as the travellers were at this moment descending a hill and the horse more than ever required to have his head held up, on account of his kneeling propensities, the result of Mr. Sneaksby's sudden abandonment of the reins was that the beast stumbled over a stone — and the reverend leader of the New Lights was pitched airily and neatly over the animal's head.

"Murder!" roared the reverend gentleman, as he rolled over and over upon the dusty road.

"Fire!" ejaculated Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, not knowing in the bewilderment of the moment what was the precise nature of the alarm which he ought to raise.

"Of a verity this is marvellously unpleasant," groaned forth Mr. Sneaksby, slowly and painfully rising from the ground and rubbing himself all over. "I am sorely bruised: but I thank God that no bones are broken. But now I cannot remount this graceless beast without assistance; and, in all Christian charity, Brother Paxwax, art thou bound to give me a leg up."

"Be it as thou sayest," exclaimed Mr. Paxwax, descending with a sort of gingerly precaution from his donkey: for the poor man was indeed enduring excruciating pain from the cause already hinted at.

Having just rubbed off the dust from his reverend leader's garments by means of his pocket-handkerchief, Mr. Paxwax endeavoured to hoist that reverend gentleman upon the horse: but just at the moment when the said reverend gentleman was about to throw his leg over, the animal started suddenly aside — and the result was that Mr. Sneaksby fell heavily a second time, bearing down Mr. Paxwax with him.

Up they both got in woful plight; and it really may be pardoned them if they both gave vent to those little ejaculatory expressions of irritation which are vulgarly called oaths. Indeed, we are bound, as honest historians, to admit that the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby damned the horse's eyes—while Mr. Ichabod Paxwax proclaimed an ardent desire to cut his cursed liver out. Their very venial impatience being thus expended in imprecations, they regarded each other with looks of shame and confusion.

"Brother Paxwax, didst thou hear the words that fell from my lips?" said Mr. Sneaksby, in a humiliated and contrite tone.

"No — that I didn't!" exclaimed Ichabod. "Neither did you hear what I said, Brother Sneaksby."

"Verily, and my ears were closed," was the response.

Mutually cheered by these assurances, they brushed the dust off each other's garments; and having performed this "Christian office," as they termed it, they made another attempt in respect to the "leg up." But this time Mr. Paxwax hoisted his revered and venerated friend so suddenly up that the said revered and venerated friend pitched completely over the animal, and rolled in the dust on the other side.

"Damnation seize you for a clumsy fool!" roared Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, now irritated beyond all power of endurance; — and starting up from the ground, he rushed after Mr. Ichabod Paxwax with the evident intention of inflicting personal chastisement upon him.

But Ichabod, despite of the menace which he had just now uttered relative to punching the head of the ungodly, was at bottom an arrant coward; —and darting away, he led Mr. Sneaksby a race, —now running round the horse and the ass —then dodging in between them—until his reverend pursuer was quite exhausted.

"Brother Paxwax," said this gentleman, panting for breath, "let there be no strife between us—but give me the hand of peace."

"Cheerfully will I respond unto thy Christian proposal, Brother Sneaksby," exclaimed Ichabod; —and he advanced in full confidence and with extended hand towards his leader.

"There! take that for your pains," ejaculated Mr. Sneaksby, dealing Mr. Paxwax a tremendous blow on the left eye the moment he got him within arm's reach.

This treacherous proceeding astounded Brother Ichabod even more completely than the assault staggered him; and clapping his hand to the damaged optic, he gazed with the other in a sort of stupid consternation upon his bellicose leader.

"Now who is the man of wrath?" he at length exclaimed—but prudently stepping back a pace or two in order to avoid a repetition of the punishment.

"I love thee, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, whose anger was now appeased by the vent it had found: "yea, verily, I love thee—and therefore do I chasten thee."

"Deuce take such love," growled Mr. Paxwax: "it has cost me no small measure of pain—besides the unpleasantness of appearing before the Reverend Joel Brugg with an eye bunged up."

"You shall bathe it in the limpid waters at the next spring we come to, Ichabod," said Mr. Sneaksby, now adopting a conciliatory tone—for in truth he was heartily ashamed of his intemperance.

"I would rather have a drop of strong water at the next public-house," quoth Mr. Paxwax.

"That likewise shalt thou have, Ichabod," rejoined the reverend gentleman.

Soothed by this promise, Mr. Paxwax once more assisted his loving friend to a leg up; and this time the leader of the New Lights was safely hoisted into his saddle. Ichabod then remounted his ass: but when the horse was put in motion, the donkey positively and sternly refused to budge an inch. There stood the stubborn animal just like a statue—gazing upon vacancy—and apparently nailed to the ground. Vainly did Mr. Paxwax coax him with sundry pattings on the neck—fruitlessly did he try the usually talismanic influence of "Gee up!" Not an inch would the beast move: but there he stood planted in the middle of the road, with the influential member of the New Lights upon his back looking quite as much like an ass as himself.

In fact, the appearance of the man and his donkey was *almost* as ridiculous as that of the equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington perched on the arch at the corner of the Green Park;—and therefore the reader may judge how very stolid indeed Mr. Ichabod Paxwax and his stubborn ass must have looked.

Fortunately for the hero of this dilemma a stage-coach happened to pass at the time; and the coachman, instantaneously comprehending the position of affairs, bestowed such a cut with his whip upon the donkey that all his obstinacy evaporated in a moment—and kicking up his heels to the great discomfiture of Ichabod's equilibrium and the great aggravation of his physical sufferings, the beast started off into a sharp canter.

The whistling sound of the whip through the air was not lost upon the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby's Rozinante, which actually and positively broke into a gallop that must have even astonished itself and would have certainly struck its owner with surprise had he been present—seeing that the animal had not performed such a feat for the last ten years.

In this manner did the cavalcade proceed for a short distance; when the appearance of a public-house became the signal for a halt. There the two pious travellers got their clothes properly brushed; and Mr. Paxwax bathed his eye, which was indeed pretty nearly bunged up, as he himself had predicted. However, all his animosity vanished when he found that while he had been busy in abluting his optic, Mr. Sneaksby had ordered devilled kidneys and a quart of egg-flip—for both of which species of creature-comforts Mr. Paxwax entertained a considerable liking.

The refreshments were relished with a zest all the more keen inasmuch as the chosen vessels of the New Lights had breakfasted at the early hour of seven in order to commence their journey at half-past;—and having disposed of the kidneys and the flip and read the landlord a homily upon brotherly love and the blessings of abstinence, they mounted their beasts and resumed their way.

The church-clock at Dartford was proclaiming the hour of noon when the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax made their entry into that town.

"Hooray!—brayvo!" yelled forth a parcel of boys who were playing at marbles in the middle of the street; and, hastily gathering up their "alley taws" and their "commoneys," they began dancing, and caperiog, and hooting, and bawling on either side of the sanctimonious travellers.

"Beware, boys—beware!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, assuming a look of awful solemnity: "remember how the wicked youths were served who insulted Elisha! Are ye not afraid that bears will come forth from yon woods in the distance and eat ye up?"

"There b'aint no beers in these here parts," cried the ringleader of the juvenile mob: and as he "took a sight" at the reverend gentleman at the same time, his mischievous companions all became convulsed with laughter.

"Gee up!" vociferated another boy: and, picking up a stick, he inflicted divers hard thwacks upon Mr. Sneaksby's horse.

"Now, then, old stubbornness!" cried a third urchin, addressing himself to the donkey;—and while Mr. Paxwax was remonstrating with him upon the impropriety and ungodliness of his conduct, another boy quietly and cleverly attached a bramble to the animal's tail.

Thereupon the ass began to exhibit divers symptoms of uneasiness, to the infinite disgust and annoyance of Mr. Paxwax, who was scarcely able to retain his seat.

"Avaunt, incarnate imps of Satan!" he thundered forth, as his hands grasped the mane of the donkey: for the beast was kicking at one moment—running forward at another—then stopping short—then backing on the pavement in a manner most threatening to the shop windows—and then galloping on again at a rate which almost jolted its unhappy rider to pieces.

And all this time the mischievous boys were keeping up with the cavalcade—yelling, hooting, tossing up their caps in the air, and playing off the artillery of their jokes and gibes against the miserable victims of this juvenile persecution. The tradesmen came forth from their shops—windows were thrown open and crowded with faces—the passengers in the street stopped to behold the amusing scene—and "the oldest inhabitant in the place" did not remember so extraordinary an excitement having ever before disturbed the tranquillity of Dartford.

At length some individual took compassion on Mr. Paxwax and removed the bramble from the donkey's tail; and this same "good Samaritan," as Mr. Sneaksby denominated him, gave the necessary information to guide the pious travellers to the dwelling of the Rev. Joel Brugg. Accordingly, in a few minutes they reached a public-house which stood within a few yards of their destination; and having put up their cattle at that place of "accommodation for man and beast," they hastened to knock at Mr. Brugg's door, the persevering small boys forming a line along the edge of the pavement and indulging in sundry ironical cheers and jocular observations.

We must here pause for a few moments to state that the Rev. Joel Brugg was the founder and pastor of a certain sect bearing the name of Candelabrians, and who were tolerably numerous in Dartford and the adjacent districts. The house in which Mr. Brugg dwelt with the wife of his bosom and the numerous family upon whose countenances he had stamped his image—and a very curious one it was too, alike in the original and in its eleven miniature reflections,—his house, we say, was a neat yellow-brick building, containing eight rooms, and having a piece of garden-ground at the back,—the whole having been purchased by the money of the Candelabrians for the express behoof of their revered pastor and the numerous tribe of Bruggs.

The Rev. Joel himself was a tall, thin, bony man—not unlike Mr. Sneaksby in figure, but having a face of very tallowy complexion and thin black hair combed in a sleek manner over his forehead. He had large greenish eyes, bearing an amazing resemblance to boiled gooseberries; and his demeanour was as solemnly sanctimonious, his gait as demurely prim, his speech as deliberately measured, and his tone as awfully sepulchral as the most fastidious "saint" could possibly desire. His wife was as like him as if she had been his sister instead of his spouse: tall, thin, and hatchet-faced, she looked both the prude and the vixen—although Mr. Brugg was wont to represent her as "the very best woman in existence."

At the moment when Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax knocked at the door, Mr. and Mrs. Brugg were in the middle of a pretty little domestic dispute relative to the dinner—or rather, what it was to consist of: for a pious Candelabrian had sent the pastor a sucking-pig in the morning, and the said pastor was desirous of having it cooked for that day's enjoyment — whereas Mrs. Brugg was equally anxious that the cold remains of a leg of mutton should be previously disposed of. The dispute was waxing so warm that the Rev. Joel was on the point of coming to blows with "the very best woman in existence," when the loud double knock fell upon their ears with startling effect; and the next moment they were frightened almost out of their wits by the yells, hootings, and hurrahings of the small boys forming the New Lights' escort.

A miserable, half-starved, dirty servant-of-all-work, whose age was about seventeen and who had a hungry eye and a famished look altogether, was hastily despatched to open the door; and the visitors were immediately conducted into the front parlour. The mob of juveniles then gave "one cheer more," and dispersed to resume their game with alley taws and commoneys.

Mr. and Mrs. Brugg were in the kitchen when the New Lights arrived at their house;—and on the wretched servant delivering the names of those worthies, the pastor hastily observed to his wife, "Well, upon my word, my love, I think you were right after all—and we will keep the pig till to-morrow. For these chaps are certain to stay to dinner: indeed, we cannot possibly avoid asking them."

"Then mind we're water-drinkers, Mr. Brugg," returned his better half, with a most emphatic significancy: "for I'm not going to waste our money in buying spirits for them fellers, I can tell you."

"Certainly not, my dear—certainly not," exclaimed Joel, approvingly. "We're water-drinkers to the back-bone—for this day at least."

Having exchanged these hasty observations and arrived at so pleasant an understanding with each other, Mr. and Mrs. Brugg proceeded with solemn demeanour to the parlour.

"Welcome, good Brother Sneaksby—welcome Brother Paxwax," said the Reverend Joel, pressing their hands cordially. "This is Mrs. Brugg, my dear friends—and I'm proud of the opportunity of introducing her to you. A nobler example of a wife cannot be found: indeed, she is in all respects the very best woman in existence."

"A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband Brother Brugg," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, after having paid his respects to the lady.

"Pray sit down, gentlemen—and make yourselves quite at home," she exclaimed, assuming as hospitable a demeanour as it was in her nature to put on. "But, dear me! what is the matter with the gentleman's eye?" she demanded, fixing her looks upon Ichabod's damaged optic.

"It was an injury received by my pious Brother, when engaged in the Lord's service," Mr. Sneaksby hastened to observe. "For, behold! as we journeyed along the great highway which men call the Dover Road, we observed certain ungodly vessels employed in breaking stones. The discourse of these benighted sinners did reach our ears; and it shocked us sorely to perceive that for every one harmless word that fell from their lips, they gave utterance to a dozen oaths. Brother Paxwax, ever zealous in the good cause, did spur his ass into a trot and ride forward to remonstrate with those men of Belial. Whereupon one of them, more deeply influenced by Satan than all the rest, did rise from his seat on the stones—gird up his loins——"

"And bung up my eye with his fist," added Mr. Paxwax, by way of affording a suitable peroration for his superior's pathetic narrative.

"Alas! it is our lot to receive stripes and be beaten with rods in the good service," said Mr. Joel Brugg, turning up the whites of his eyes and shaking his head solemnly. "But the divine grace and two leeches applied to-night, Brother Paxwax, will accomplish a cure. And now, my beloved friends, you will break bread with me—and then we will discourse upon the subject of your visit. My dear," he added, turning towards his wife, "what hast thou in the way of provender to offer unto these pious wayfarers?"

"A crust and a cup of cold water will suffice, dear Brother Brugg," said Mr. Sneaksby.

"Or anything that you may have provided for your own frugal meal, dear sister," observed Mr. Paxwax, addressing the lady; and at the same time he gave a sniff in order to ascertain whether there was any odour of roast meat in the house.

"Verily, and we would not insult your known virtues in respect to temperance, dear brethren, by placing before you the flesh-pots of Egypt," said the Rev. Joel Brugg.

"Assuredly not," added his better-half. "A morsel of cold mutton and a potato, with some water from a delicious spring in the neighbourhood, constitute our repast of this day, under the divine blessing: and to our humble board ye are truly welcome."

The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby's countenance became uncommonly blank for a moment, and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax made an awful face, as this frugal bill of fare was submitted to their consideration: but, in-

[CAROLINE WALTERS.]

stantly commanding their feelings, they laid the soothing unction to their souls that hospitable people very often speak modestly of the really handsome banquet which is forthcoming.

This happy delusion was however speedily dispelled by the entrance of the servant-of-all-work to lay the cloth, and by the appearance of the cold mutton, the dish of potatoes, and a large jug of water. Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax exchanged rapid glances expressive of unmitigated disgust; and even their last hope that something better than the limpid element from the spring might be forthcoming, was totally destroyed when they saw the servant leave the room without receiving any instructions to fetch beer from the public-house.

The three eldest Masters Brugg and Miss Tabitha Brugg were now introduced to take their places at the dinner-table, they having the privilege of dining with their parents; while a terrific stamping, screaming, and quarrelling in the room overhead, showed pretty plainly that the more juvenile olive-branches of the Brugg genus were doomed to the ignominious captivity of the nursery.

Mr. Joel Brugg now said a grace which lasted for nearly a quarter of an hour, and during which every one round the table held his head almost down into his plate: but Mr. Paxwax was all the while thinking to himself that the provender was by no means commensurate with the thanksgiving. However, as he was exceedingly hungry, in spite of the devilled kidneys and the egg-flip, he managed to devour his share of the cold mutton—an example which was worthily followed by the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby. For the sake of appearances they were likewise compelled to inflict the penalty of cold water upon their stomachs; and although Mr. Sneaksby gulped down his supply with as good a grace as he could assume, Mr. Paxwax could not possibly conceal his abhorrence for the primitive fluid.

The repast was ended—the cloth was removed—and the three boys had retired with Miss Tabitha, when the servant-of-all-work, either in ignorance of her mistress's parsimonious intentions, or else in a little spirit of spite for numerous petty acts of tyranny inflicted upon her, exclaimed in a loud tone as she stood on the threshold of the door, "Please, ma'am, shall I put the gin on the table and bring up the hot water *as usual ?*"

Mr. Ichabod Paxwax actually bounded upon his chair in delight; and Mr. Sneaksby's mouth instantaneously began to water. These little circumstances were not lost upon Mr. and Mrs. Brugg, who exchanged rapid glances: for the domestic had committed a blunder which seriously compromised both their hospitality and their parsimony.

"Verily," said Mr. Paxwax, fearful lest a negative should be put upon the maid-of-all-work's proposal, "I think that a *leetle* drop of something warm would—would—do my eye good," he added, no better excuse suggesting itself at the instant.

"Well, then," exclaimed Mrs. Brugg sharply, and with a threatening look at the miserable servant, "if there does happen to be any gin in the house, we will break through an established rule and partake of a thimble-full each in honour of our beloved guests. You may bring up the hot water."

"Oh! I know there's plenty of gin in the bottle, ma'am," said the domestic: "because I got it filled yesterday at the public, and you and master only drank half of it."

"Go and get the hot water, I say," almost shrieked forth Mrs. Brugg, darting terrific glances at the unfortunate maid.

There was no help for it!—and the lady was accordingly compelled to open her cupboard and produce the bottle, much to the satisfaction of the New Lights. Glasses, hot-water, sugar, and lemons were speedily placed upon the table; and having brewed himself a good jorum, Ichabod was himself again!

But how cordially in her heart did Mrs. Brugg hate and detest both that individual and Mr. Sneaksby, when she saw them half fill their tumblers with gin before they poured in the water; and at every sip they took, she secretly wished that the steaming fluid might choke them. Indeed, being scarcely able to restrain her vexation, she was compelled to rush out into the kitchen and pour forth her envenomed feelings against the miserable servant; then, having thus far relieved herself, she hurried up into the nursery, where she found a vent for the remainder of her ill-humour by boxing the children's ears all round.

These two scenes of domestic life having passed off to her satisfaction, she returned to the parlour—but only to experience a horror and a consternation which, as she declared to some friend on a subsequent occasion, "almost proved the death of her:" for, lo and behold! while she was employed in thrashing her olive-branches in the nursery, Mr. Brugg had actually sent out for more gin!

"Well, my dearly-beloved friends," her husband began to say the moment she thus returned to the room—for he, prudent man! was anxious that she should catch the conciliatory words that he sent forth in order to avert a storm,—"I have already told you that my wife is the very best woman in existence——Oh! here you are, my dear!" he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, as if he did not know that she had been standing for half a minute upon the threshold. "I was only telling our Christian friends what an excellent wife you are to me—and how hospitable you always prove yourself towards your guests——Ahem! my dear, will you take a *leetle* drop more gin? It is good for the stomach's sake, as the Apostle said of wine."

"No, Mr. Brugg—I will *not* take another drop—and I beg that you will not either," exclaimed the irritated lady. "If these gentlemen choose to finish the bottle, let them—but *you* sha'n't help them, I can tell you;"—and as she resumed her seat she darted spiteful looks at the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

"My dear, my dear," said the Rev. Joel Brugg, in a tone of gentle remonstrance,—"I hope you will not prove otherwise than—than—the very best woman in existence."

"Now you leave me alone and go on with your business, whatever it may be," exclaimed Mrs. Brugg, folding her arms and leaning back in the chair in a very determined manner, as if she were performing the part of sentinel upon the gin-bottle, whereon her looks now remained fixed.

"Well, my Christian brethren," resumed Mr. Brugg, casting uneasy glances from time to time at his wife,—"let us take into consideration the matter whereof ye are come to treat with me. And if my poor comprehension does not lead me astray, this visit on your part ariseth from certain observations which I made last week when I saw you in London."

"Yea, verily," responded Mr. Sneaksby: "for on that occasion thou didst hint at the possibility of the amalgamation of the pious Candelabrians with the blessed New Lights."

"And forasmuch as the Candelabrians are numerous and influential," said Mr. Brugg, "the New Lights should join us and become merged in our community."

"Nay, Brother Brugg," exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, "the Candelabrians must become incorporated with the New Lights."

"Surely you are dreaming, Brother Sneaksby?" cried Mr. Brugg, becoming excited. "What? the Candelabrians resign that name which took me six months to think of and three more to fix the precise manner of spelling it? No, sir—no: it can't be done! Besides, when I founded the sect of Candelabrians, I meant to imply that they were the candles to light the world to the reading of the Scriptures——"

"And pray what else are the New Lights?" demanded Mr. Sneaksby, likewise growing irritable.

"Aye—what are the New Lights, I should like to know?" exclaimed Mr. Paxwax.

"Shall I tell you?" said Mrs. Brugg, her lips white and quivering with the vixenish ill-humour that stirred her soul.

"If you choose, ma'am," responded the Rev Nathaniel Sneaksby. "I should like to hear *your* opinion of the New Lights," he added, with a sarcastic emphasis.

"And so should I," said Mr. Paxwax. "Come ma'am—out with it—what are we?"

"Humbugs—rank humbugs!" ejaculated Mrs. Brugg. "There, now I've told you—and my mind's relieved of a weight."

Thus speaking, the virago started from her chair—seized upon the gin-bottle, the sugar, and the

lemons—and proceeded to lock them all up in the cupboard: then, bouncing to the room door, she threw it wide open,—and stopping short upon the threshold, she turned towards her husband, exclaiming, "Now, Mr. Brugg, the sooner you get rid of them drunken New Lights, the better!"

And again bouncing onward, she hastened along a passage leading to the kitchen, the door of which she banged behind her with a violence that shook the whole house to its foundation.

"Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, rising from his chair as soon as he had somewhat recovered from the stupefaction into which this extraordinary proceeding threw him,—"we are in the tents of the ungodly, and it is time for us to be gone."

"Brother Sneaksby," responded Ichabod, likewise quitting his seat,—"we cannot remain beneath this inhospitable fig-tree any longer—for the gin has disappeared," he added, in a low voice to himself.

"My dear Christian friends," said Mr. Brugg, imploringly—for he was afraid that the scene would be reported abroad to his discredit,—"I humbly beseech you to pardon this treatment on the part of—of—the very best woman in existence."

"May the devil take such women—and you too, sir," cried the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, unable to keep a rein upon his temper any longer. "I never saw such an accursed termagant in all my life."

"Nor I such a wretched hen-pecked old fool," cried Mr. Paxwax, rushing out into the passage as he spoke and opening the front door, for fear that his remark might provoke Mr. Brugg to hurl the jug of hot water at his head. "Come along, Brother Sneaksby."

"I am coming, Brother Paxwax," said this reverend gentleman, who was not quite such a coward as his satellite: and having flung a look of mingled ferocity and contempt upon the astounded Joel Brugg, he stalked majestically out of the house, leaving the front door wide open behind him.

Repairing to the public-house where they had put up their cattle, the two New Lights sate down in the parlour and began to console themselves with steaming jorums of gin-punch for the insult and inhospitality which they had experienced at Brother Brugg's;—and as the injuries which their feelings had sustained were manifold and deep, the amount of solace required was necessarily proportionate. But as this solace consisted in gin-punch, in the same ratio that it lightened their hearts so did it lighten their heads; and when at about four o'clock in the afternoon they paid their bill and issued forth to mount their beasts, their pace was so unsteady that they mutually agreed there never was a place with such wretchedly loose and uneven pavement in all the world as Dartford.

Followed by the broad grins of the landlord, the hostler, and several hangers-on about the inn, the pious travellers commenced their journey homeward. But again had they to endure the persecution of the small boys, who, perceiving the inebriated condition of the two sanctimonious vessels, became perfectly uproarious in their glee and so extremely practical in their jokes that Mr. Sneaksby had two falls from his horse and Mr. Paxwax three from his ass before the limits of Dartford were reached. At length the urchins took leave of them; and they pursued their way without farther molestation of that kind.

Presently a tremendous shower of rain began to fall; and the two leaders of the New Lights were speedily wet through to the skin. Vainly did they urge on their beasts to gain the nearest way-side public-house: the horse proved almost as obstinate as the donkey—and before a sheltering roof even appeared in sight, the reverend travellers were completely drenched. The water poured down from the broad brims of their hats as if they were sluices opened for the occasion; and never did human beings look or feel more thoroughly miserable. At length they put up at a tavern, where they resolved to sup and pass the night; and with sorrow be it recorded that the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and his friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax were conveyed blind drunk to bed.

On the following morning they resumed their journey, the weather having cleared up; and with faces woefully elongated by reason of the head-ache which they experienced and the remorseful memories which filled their brains, they entered the metropolis at about mid-day. Proceeding straight to the stables where they had hired the mettled charger and the noble donkey, they felt a perfect relief when they thus got rid of their cattle; and hastening to Jermyn Street, they made such improvements in their toilette as rendered them fit to present themselves to the august synod of New Light Elders assembled in the vestry-room of Salem to receive them.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that they denounced in the strongest terms the inhospitable conduct of the Rev. Joel Brugg of Dartford; but in giving an account of their visit and its failure, neither Mr. Sneaksby nor Mr. Paxwax thought it at all necessary to state how tremendously tipsy they had both got.

CHAPTER CXLIX.

THE AFFLICTED MAIDEN.

In the morning after the adventures at the masquerade, Pauline Clarendon awoke in a magnificently furnished bed-chamber,—the canopy overhanging the couch and the tops of the looking-glass frames being surmounted with ducal coronets.

For a few instants she was a prey to a wild bewilderment as she cast her eyes around: but almost immediately her ideas settled themselves into the proper places in her brain,—and she recollected all that had occurred on the preceding evening—where she was now—and how she came thither. Then, as the fancied perfidy of Lord Florimel rose uppermost in her mind and dominated all her other thoughts, she buried her countenance in the pillow and gave way to an agonised ebullition of grief.

The flood of tears which she thus poured forth, relieved her somewhat;—and she had just dried the pearly drops upon her long lashes and her pale cheeks, when the door opened gently and the brilliant Duchess of Devonshire entered the apartment.

"My dearest Pauline," she exclaimed, approaching the bed and taking the young lady's hand, "do tell me what has happened! Nothing has occurred to Octavia, I hope——"

"Nothing, my generous friend—my noble benefactress," said Pauline. "But I must apologise

most sincerely for seeking your abode last night—especially in a masquerade apparel and totally unattended——"

"Do not say anything in the shape of an excuse, Pauline," interrupted the Duchess, seating herself by the bed-side: "but tell me what you will in the form of an explanation, as between friends. Something unpleasant has happened, I am very sure—for your eyes are red with weeping, and moreover I am well aware that this masquerading adventure was no idle whim nor foolish freak on your part."

"Your surmise is correct, my kind friend," observed the young lady, subduing with a violent effort a fresh outbreak of her grief.

"I know you too well—understand your character too profoundly—and entertain too high an opinion of you, Pauline," said the Duchess, "to imagine for a moment that you would venture alone to a masquerade without some strong and sufficient reason. Therefore, even if you should refuse me your confidence, I shall not think the less favourably of you."

"But I do not intend to refuse you my confidence," exclaimed Pauline. "I have received too many kindnesses at your hands not to regard you as the best friend I have in the world. When circumstances forced me to abandon my father's dwelling, you offered me a home—and a home has your Grace likewise provided for my unfortunate sister. Do not, therefore, imagine for a moment that I am unmindful of all you have done for me, or ungrateful for the many bounties of which I have been the recipient."

"I know that you are good, and amiable, and candid, my sweetest friend," said the Duchess; "and on that account I have conceived a warm affection for you. Tell me if there be any way in which I can still serve you—and you may rely upon my zeal and readiness in your cause."

"First let me unbosom myself to your Grace," answered Pauline; "and then I may perhaps have a favour to implore at your hands."

Having thus spoken, the young lady took up some of her masquerading apparel which lay on a chair near the bed; and drawing forth a letter from the bosom of the dress, she handed it to the Duchess of Devonshire.

The contents of that billet were as follow:—

"Lord Florimel is unfaithful to you. While affecting a complete reformation in his conduct, his private life is as profligate as ever; but his intrigues are carried on with a greater circumspection. To-morrow night he will be present at a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, disguised in a blue domino edged with a peculiar braiding and having a star of the same material on the top or crown of the hood. The object of his visit to that scene is a new love intrigue; and you may convince yourself with your own eyes that such is the fact. The writer of this note is animated by no other desire than a sincere wish to prevent so much virtue, generous confidence, amiability, and candour being sacrificed to such profound hypocrisy, such foul deceit, and such unpardonable treachery: for by all *those* virtues are you characterised—and by all *these* faults is Lord Florimel distinguished.

"Well aware that you are so utterly unacquainted with all the arts of London dissipation, as to be ignorant even how to proceed in order to procure at so short a notice a suitable disguise for the purpose which this letter naturally suggests, the writer has made the necessary arrangements at a respectable fancy-dress warehouse in London (the card of which is enclosed). The mistress of the establishment will have a chamber prepared for you to perform your toilette in the strictest privacy; and you can proceed thence in a hackney-coach to the theatre, which is at no great distance from the warehouse.

"One word more. The writer positively and earnestly enjoins you not to address a syllable of reproach to Lord Florimel within the walls of the theatre. You are even forbidden to accost him in a manner that may enable him to guess who you are. On the contrary, you must restrain your feelings and take time to deliberate upon the proper course to be subsequently pursued."

"I need not ask whether you received confirmation of the suspicions which this anonymous letter excited," said the Duchess of Devonshire, in a tone of the profoundest sympathy, when she had brought the perusal of the document to a close. "Alas! my dear friend, those tears which are falling from your eyes prove that the information was indeed too true."

"Too true — yes — too true!" murmured Pauline, the big drops chasing each other down her cheeks and falling upon her fair virginal bosom as she sate up in the bed gazing with a look of the deepest affliction upon Georgiana. "This letter, which is dated, as you perceive, the day before yesterday and is addressed to me at your own villa near Aylesbury, I received early yesterday morning; and confiding my poor sister to the care of the nurse, I came to London. At the warehouse mentioned in the note I purchased that fancy dress; and having assumed it, I proceeded to the theatre. The masque in the blue domino with the curious braiding was already there: but at first it struck me that he was too tall for Gabriel. However, after a time I mustered up courage to accost him; and, reckless of the injunctions so emphatically expressed in the concluding portion of the note, I asked who he was. Then, doubtless believing me to be the fair one whom he expected to meet at that place, he instantaneously announced himself as Lord Florimel—yes, and in such terms too, that left no doubt as to his perfidy."

Pauline stopped short, her voice almost suffocated with the deep sobs which rent her bosom; and the Duchess, throwing her arms around the young lady's neck, besought her to moderate her grief.

"Oh! my dearest, dearest friend," exclaimed Pauline, in a more hurried and painful accent than before, "you cannot wonder if my heart be ready to burst with this woe which is too vast for it to contain! For I have loved your perfidious cousin—Oh! I have loved him as never woman loved before; and when his own lips, breathing his name in my ear last night, confirmed the terrible suspicion that was already rending my soul, 'twas as if the knell of doom were reverberating within the living cells of my brain! Boundless was my affection—an illimitable flood of the tenderest feelings, knowing no ebb, but ever gushing with the impulse of love's spring-tide. Conceive, then, how fearful is the anguish attendant upon the reaction of such a love as this—and how every nerve must quiver with an ineffable excruciation. And, oh! if it were not that a feeling of pride—nay, rather of proud indignation—now sustained me, I should sink beneath the weight of this blow so cruel—so undeserved—so unexpected!"

And as Pauline gave utterance to this last sentence, her countenance, a moment before so pale, became suddenly flushed with a crimson hue—and

the pearly tears which still stood upon her cheeks, shone lustrous as the dew-drops on the pomegranate.

"Had Gabriel remained true to his plight and faithful to the solemn promises which he so profusely breathed in my ears," she continued, after a long pause, and now speaking in a deep, low tone,—"mine would have proved a lot fraught with a happiness which no power of language can describe. But, alas!" she exclaimed, in a voice denoting a sudden and irresistible self-abandonment to the full tide of bitter affliction, while she pressed her hand forcibly upon her bosom as if to silence the beatings of her heart,—"alas! that dream of bliss has now been destroyed — the vision has fled, never to return."

"Oh! speak not thus despondingly, my dearest Pauline," said the generous-hearted Georgiana. "Let me become the peace-maker between you——"

"No, my kind friend—*that* may not be," interrupted the young lady, her voice and manner suddenly resuming their wonted firmness. "The bond which linked our hearts is for ever broken—and nothing can restore my confidence in Gabriel. I loved him not for his fortune nor his title: I loved him for himself alone—and after all that occurred last night, there is an end of everything between us. But I have not yet explained to your Grace the termination of my adventures and how I came to seek the protection and security of your abode. On leaving the theatre, I remembered that I had not informed the people at the fancy-dress warehouse that I should return to lay aside my masquerading attire and resume my own garb; and I knew that it was then too late to disturb the mistress of the shop. I accordingly entered a vehicle and ordered the coachman to drive me to a respectable hotel. But I was already the object of an infamous conspiracy set on foot by that royal profligate to whom my poor sister is indebted for her ruin," added Pauline, with exceeding bitterness of tone and great excitement of manner.

"What! the Prince dared to persecute *you?*" ejaculated the Duchess of Devonshire, who, in spite of her own levity of conduct and deficiency of virtuous principle, was shocked at the idea which Pauline's words had engendered in her mind.

"Yes—his Royal Highness dared to make me the object of his tender persecution," responded the young lady, still speaking in a tone of bitterness; "and, in pursuance of the intrigues which he had set on foot to ensnare me, I was taken to the infamous dwelling of Mrs. Brace the milliner, instead of to a respectable hotel."

"Oh! this is really too bad!" exclaimed Georgiana, in no affected tone of indignation. "He ought to have remembered that you were the sister of one who was already too deeply afflicted on his account."

"The future Sovereign of these realms knows neither generosity nor remorse," said Pauline, emphatically; "and despite of my representations—my reproaches—my entreaties, he would have ruined me——Oh! my God! he would have ruined me," she cried, shuddering all over at the recollection of the tremendous danger in which she had been involved,—"had not my screams brought assistance. I escaped from his arms—I escaped from the house—and throwing myself into a vehicle which happened to be passing through the Square at the moment, I ordered the coachman to take me to a dwelling where I knew that friendship would afford me a secure asylum. And that dwelling is Devonshire House."

"Where you are truly welcome, Pauline," exclaimed the Duchess, in a compassionating tone. "I am grieved that I was not at home last night when you arrived: for perhaps the solace which a sincere friend might have proffered, would not have proved unwelcome. On returning from Lady Dewhurst's, at whose residence his Grace and myself had passed the evening, I was amazed to hear that you had come to pay Devonshire House so unexpected a visit—and I hurried hither to ascertain whether anything unpleasant had occurred. But you were sleeping so soundly——"

"Ah! my kind friend, I was exhausted in mind and body," exclaimed Pauline, the tears once more starting forth upon her long lashes;—"and I slept profoundly, it is true — but my slumbers were haunted with hideous dreams. However, I must strive to combat against the sorrow which now weighs upon me like an almost intolerable burthen, and beneath which all my energies, mental and physical, seem to bend."

"And you will not permit me to act as a peace-maker between my faithless cousin Florimel and yourself?" said the splendid Georgiana, in a tone which testified how cheerfully she would undertake the task of pacification.

"No—never!" replied Pauline, with a resolute manner. "A thousand, thousand times do I thank your Grace for this generous desire to interfere in my behalf: but, although I can never cease to love Lord Florimel, yet I dare not risk the utter and total wreck of my peace of mind by becoming the wife of a man who makes solemn pledges so lightly and breaks them so easily. Your Grace will therefore confer an infinite favour upon me by pressing that point no more. And now,—as I wish to withdraw myself altogether from the possibility of receiving either visits or letters from Lord Florimel—and as I am likewise anxious to seek that seclusion which may shield me against any fresh persecutions that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales may possibly think fit to institute with regard to me,—I purpose to retire with my unfortunate sister to some quiet neighbourhood, where I may pass my time in ministering to the cure of her wounded spirit and surrounding her with consolations when the restoration of her intellects will render such solace needful."

"And in what manner, my dear Pauline," asked the Duchess, "can I assist your views in this respect?"

"By adding pecuniary succour to the generous aid your Grace has already afforded me," was the response. "I will not apply to my father: but I do not hesitate to solicit this boon at your hands, because I feel so much confidence in your friendship——"

"Enough, my dear Pauline," interposed the Duchess of Devonshire. "If you were to act otherwise than in this spirit of affectionate reliance, I should have been deeply grieved. And now tell me where you would like to fix your abode?"

"Previously to my father's removal to Cavendish Square," answered Pauline, "we resided in a pretty little house on a terrace called Paradise Villas, in the Edgeware Road. For upwards of eighteen months did we dwell there; and I feel some secret and unaccountable impulse urging me

to return to that once happy home. Both the Prince and Lord Florimel are aware that we once resided there: but they would never think of seeking me in my former abode. It is consequently my intention to repair thither presently and ascertain if the house which we lately occupied is still to let."

"Indeed, my dear Pauline, you shall not take that trouble upon yourself," exclaimed Georgiana. "You shall repose a few hours longer: for you are doubtless fatigued in body as well as in mind—and your breakfast shall be sent up to you in a few minutes. At mid-day you shall accompany me in the carriage to see all that I may have done for you in the meantime,—and then you shall hasten to Aylesbury to fetch Octavia."

Having thus spoken, the good-hearted Duchess kissed Pauline's cheek with a pure sisterly affection, and then hurried from the room to escape the expressions of gratitude which the young lady, with tears streaming down her countenance, began to utter in a voice broken by emotions.

In about a quarter of an hour a female servant made her appearance with a silver tray covered with the materials for an excellent breakfast: but poor Pauline had no appetite for any of the luxuries thus provided. Having partaken, however, of a cup of chocolate, she requested writing materials to be brought to her; and she also desired that a messenger might be sent to the fancy-dress warehouse to procure the apparel which she had left there on the preceding evening. These instructions were complied with; and having risen from the sumptuous couch and performed her toilette, Pauline sat down to pen a few lines to Lord Florimel.

Then, as she pondered — painfully pondered— upon the style which she ought to adopt, the words uttered by the Gipsy-masque at the theatre on the preceding evening, recurred to her memory;— and she slowly repeated them over to herself.

"*When a virtuous woman's dignity is offended by a faithless lover, she does not write a long letter of mingled complaint, upbraiding, and reproach: but she pens a few laconic words, commanding him to seek her presence no more, and leaving him to calculate and weigh all the motives which have suggested a proceeding at once so dignified and imperious.*"

And, her mind yielding to the bias of these suggestions, she indited a letter in the spirit thereof: but the precise nature of its contents will be explained hereafter.

Securing the billet in the bosom of her dress, to be posted only when her removal into her contemplated seclusion should have taken place, Pauline anxiously awaited the return of the Duchess. Punctual to her promise, the beautiful and generous-hearted Georgiana repaired to the young lady's chamber, ready apparelled in her carriage-dress; and, the vehicle being in attendance, they issued forth together.

On being seated in the carriage, the Duchess ordered the coachman to drive to Paradise Villas, Edgeware Road: then, as the vehicle rolled away from Devonshire House, she turned with an arch smile towards Pauline, observing, "The three hours which have elapsed since I left you, my dear friend, have not been wasted, as you shall presently see. His Grace, whom I made acquainted with the purpose which I entertained on your behalf, instantaneously despatched his agent to take the business in hand; and considerable progress is no doubt already made in the matter."

Pauline could only express her gratitude by tears: for her feelings were too deeply touched to allow the utterance of words. The Duchess continued to discourse with her in the kindest manner; and in a short time the carriage stopped in front of Paradise Villas. From the window did Pauline cast her looks at the house where she had spent so many happy days,—the house in which she had first become acquainted with Florimel,—the house, too, where the Prince of Wales, under the name of Mr. Harley, had poured his insidious love-tales into the ears of her sister. There was much of mingled bitterness and pleasure in the reminiscences thus suddenly called up in the young lady's mind; but, even if the latter feeling did not altogether predominate, there was nevertheless a melancholy charm in the prospect of returning to an abode she had once loved and every feature of which was so familiar to her recollection.

On alighting from the carriage, the Duchess and Pauline entered the house, the door of which was standing open;—and in the front parlour they found two respectable-looking elderly gentlemen, both of whom saluted Georgiana with the profoundest respect. One of them was the Duke of Devonshire's agent—and the other his solicitor; and in this capacity were they forthwith introduced to Pauline.

But before there was leisure to exchange a word upon matters of business, a waggon, laden with furniture, stopped in front of the house;—and Pauline, now fully comprehending all the generous zeal which Georgiana had exercised in her behalf, threw herself upon that noble lady's bosom and wept plenteously. The agent and the attorney were much moved by this pathetic scene;—and when that first ebullition of feeling was expended, Pauline was enabled to bestow her attention to the men of business.

In a few words the agent informed her that, immediately upon receiving the Duke's instructions at nine o'clock that morning, he had ascertained who was the proprietor of the house in question; and, being fortunate enough to find that individual at home, the projected transaction was speedily arranged between them. In fine, the house had been purchased in the name of Miss Pauline Clarendon; and the Duke's attorney had been called in to assist in the drawing up of a provisional deed making over the property to the young lady, until the more formal and elaborate conveyance could be effected. In the meantime the Duke's upholsterer had received certain instructions, the result of which was the arrival of the waggon laden with furniture, and attended by several men to put down the carpets and fit up the entire premises as promptly as many hands could work and money could inspire them with the requisite activity.

Vain were it to attempt to describe the mingled joy and gratitude of Pauline on receiving all these munificent proofs of the friendship entertained for her by the Duchess of Devonshire: suffice it to say that if her words fell short in expressing her feelings, her looks made up for the deficiency. And the noble lady—the authoress of this generous work—what were *her* emotions? Oh! never until then had she experienced so full and profound an appreciation of the value of riches as a means to do good;—and many a frailty—many an error—many a fault,—aye

and much want of virtuous principle in the general routine of her existence,—were atoned for by the fostering succour thus afforded to an otherwise friendless, persecuted, and unhappy maiden!

On returning to Devonshire House, Pauline partook of luncheon with her kind-hearted friend; and, the Duke's travelling-carriage having been ordered in the meantime, the young lady took an affectionate leave of the Duchess and set out for the villa near Aylesbury. There her preparations for departure were soon made; and Octavia, whose aberration of intellect had within the last few days assumed the form of a harmless childishness, was delighted when she comprehended that she was to take a ride in the travelling-carriage. The nurse who had all along attended upon the unfortunate victim of royal lust, accompanied the sisters to their new home—or rather, on this return to their former one;—and it was about eleven o'clock at night when the party reached Paradise Villas in the Edgeware Road.

Pauline had entertained some apprehensions relative to the effect which this removal to a familiar scene might produce upon her sister; and during the journey thither from the vicinage of Aylesbury, she had more than once regretted her resolution to take up her future abode in that house where Octavia had first met the Prince. But those alarms proved unfounded, and, indeed, rather experienced an opposite result: for on entering her former home, Octavia appeared to recognise it, changed though it were by the handsome furniture which now constituted its comfort and its tasteful elegance—and the unfortunate young lady, throwing herself upon Pauline's bosom, burst into a flood of tears.

From that day forth a gradual improvement was visible in the mental condition of Octavia Clarendon.

CHAPTER CL.

THE LAWYER AND HIS MYSTERIOUS VISITRESS.

The reader will observe it was on the day following the masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre that the adventures of Mr. Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax occurred on the one hand, and that the incidents chronicled in the preceding chapter took place on the other. It was likewise on this same day, and at about the hour of noon, that a young female, neatly apparelled and enveloped in a cloak, alighted from a hackney-coach at the entrance to Featherstone Buildings, Holborn.

Passing into that place, she examined the brass-plates on the doors and the inscriptions on the door-posts, until her eyes encountered the name of Mr. Rigden painted on one of the latter; and forthwith entering the Clerks' Office, she inquired if she could see the attorney himself. The reply was in the affirmative; and her name was requested. This however she refused to give,—observing that Mr. Rigden did not know her, but that her business was of considerable importance. Finally, after one of the clerks had communicated with his master, the young woman was introduced to that gentleman's private office.

"Be seated," said Mr. Rigden, taking a rapid but searching survey of the visitress, as if he sought to penetrate into the nature of her business even before she had begun to explain it;—and he saw before him a very pretty female—almost a girl—of short stature, and whose countenance wore an air of deep decision and firmness of purpose.

In obedience to his invitation, she took a chair: then, fixing her eyes for a few moments upon Mr. Rigden's features, she scrutinised them in her turn, as if to assure herself that he was a man to whom she might confide some purpose which she had in view. Rapid and even furtive as that survey was, Mr. Rigden did not fail to notice it;—and the profoundly experienced man of business full well comprehended its meaning and purport. Imagining, therefore, that the mystery attendant upon the visitress and the very nature of that scrutinising look which she had fixed upon him, augured the development of an affair of more than usual importance, he said a few words to encourage her to open the requisite explanations.

"May I consider, sir," said the young woman, "that if nothing should come of the discourse which we may presently have together, the subject of that conversation shall remain a profound secret?"

"Unless you divulge to me any crime the punishment of which is demanded by the laws of society," responded the wary solicitor, "I shall as a matter of course look upon the object of your visit as strictly confidential."

The young woman did not appear quite satisfied with this answer; and she reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, during which Mr. Rigden took snuff with an air of calm indifference.

"If you feel interested, sir, in the claims or pretensions of a particular client," the girl at length said, "would you not be grateful to any one who could assist you in the furtherance of that client's interests?"

"Most assuredly," answered the lawyer: then, in a measured and significant tone, he added, "I should likewise know how to reward the individual rendering such succour."

"But if this succour were of somewhat an equivocal character?" said the young woman, inquiringly.

"There are many things which in the ordinary affairs of life deserve the name of subterfuges, equivocations, unjust dealings, and the taking of improper advantages, but which come within the legitimate course of procedure in legal matters."

And having given this reply, which, though guarded and cautious, was still encouraging, the attorney took another pinch of snuff.

"The production or the suppression of a document in a law-suit is frequently attended with the most important results, I believe?" said the young woman, evidently acquiring confidence, and yet feeling her way with the utmost care.

"As a matter of course," exclaimed Mr. Rigden "and it is the province of the lawyer to avail himself of all those advantages which circumstances may throw in his way. Nor must he be over nice in looking into the source whence those advantages emanate."

Again the girl reflected deeply for a few moments;—and again did Mr. Rigden regale his nostrils with snuff.

"Suppose, sir," resumed the strange visitress, "that you were interested for a client whose cause depended upon the production of certain papers on the part of his opponent;—and suppose some one had the power of rendering it impossible for that

opponent to produce these necessary papers? Would you countenance this *some one* in such a line of conduct?"

"I have yet to learn," said Mr. Rigden, "that it is a crime, or a dishonour, or even an impropriety for an attorney to buy off a hostile witness or keep him out of the way, if possible. On the contrary, this is done every day, and enters into the widely ramified proceedings of legitimate law-chicanery. And again, if certain papers, constituting in themselves important testimony, are to be purchased either for production or suppression, I do not think that the King's Attorney-General would hesitate to enter into such a transaction; and what the Attorney-General would do, a humble individual such as Mr. Rigden need not blush to accomplish."

"In plain terms, then," said the girl, now fixing her eyes with a keen significance upon the lawyer, "you are prepared to enter into a transaction which is quite safe and secure and will no doubt put a large sum of money into your pocket?"

"And into yours also — eh?" observed Mr. Rigden, suffering his cold and almost stern features to relax for a moment into a smile.

"No, sir—not a farthing!" exclaimed the young woman, with impassioned vehemence.

"How nothing?" demanded the attorney, in astonishment.

"Because my motives are not mercenary, sir," was the immediate response. "And on that point I beg to decline any explanation whatsoever."

"Then if your motives be not mercenary, there is assuredly greater confidence to be placed in you," said the lawyer, with a view of encouraging his visitress to proceed. "Come—we are alone—in a place where no eaves-dropper can overhear what passes between us—and you have already felt your way with sufficient precaution. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," was the reply; "and I will no longer hesitate to explain the object of my presence here. You have a client, Mr. Rigden, who believes that he has certain claims upon the title and estates now in the enjoyment of Lord Florimel?"

"Exactly so," said the attorney. "But how came you with this information?"

"That is my business," observed the young woman, laconically. "It is true, then, that you have such a client: and you are doubtless anxious to put him in possession of all that he claims?"

"Such is the aim of every attorney who enjoys the confidence of his client," returned Mr. Rigden, taking snuff consequentially.

"And an affair of such importance would not only prove most lucrative, but also of great advantage to your professional reputation?" continued the girl.

"I shall not affect any fastidiousness by denying those propositions," said the lawyer, marvelling at the acuteness of so young a creature in probing as it were the very thoughts which he was revolving in his mind at the moment.

"But in order to ensure the success of your client," she proceeded, "it is necessary that Lord Florimel should be unable to produce certain documents."

"Such is the fact," replied Mr. Rigden, now becoming more deeply interested than ever in the present discourse.

"And if any one were to place those deeds in your hands," said the girl, in a low, measured, and solemn tone, "would you send them back to Lord Florimel with a letter informing him how you became possessed of them?—in a word, what would you do with them?"

Mr. Rigden took snuff and gazed intently upon the young woman in order to read in her countenance all that was passing in her mind: then, satisfied with the result of a scrutiny from which she did not wince, he said in a voice as low, measured, and solemn as her own had just been—"If I had those documents in my possession, I should keep them!"

"And would you know at a glance, if they were placed before you, whether they were the right ones or not?" demanded the girl, her eyes flaming up with the lustre of joy and triumph as that response which the lawyer gave fell upon her ears.

"Yes—at a glance," he immediately rejoined.

"Then are these the documents your client requires?" she exclaimed, rising from her seat and producing from beneath her cloak a bundle of parchments and other deeds tied round with red tape.

Mr. Rigden, forgetting his usual cold tranquillity of manner, greedily extended his hands to grasp the papers: but the young woman made an imperious motion for him to desist. She then opened the parcel and allowed him to peruse the first lines of the principal document—observing at the same time, "If they be not the deeds which you require, I shall not leave them with you."

"But they are—they are!" exclaimed Mr. Rigden, becoming perfectly excited with joy: for the prospects of a lucrative suit and the fame of conducting such a cause to a successful issue—together with *other considerations*—instantaneously sprang up in his imagination.

"And you will make use of those papers to forward the views of your client and ruin Lord Florimel?" said the girl, her countenance becoming ghastly pale and almost hideous with the workings of evil passions in her bosom—so that the keen-sighted attorney had now no difficulty in fathoming the motive which was instigating her in the present proceeding.

"What guarantee can you give me that the present transaction will remain enveloped in eternal secrecy?" asked the lawyer. "Remember, you are a stranger to me—you have not even told me who you are nor whence you come—and you may have taken this step in a moment of spite——"

"Oh! I can give you the best guarantee which it is in mortal power to afford," exclaimed the young girl, her stature appearing to become more elevated as she drew herself up in the sublimity of her wrath and her triumph—while her countenance grew animated with a supernal lustre, as it it caught the reflection of those flames which were burning in the hell of her heart. "And that guarantee," she continued, in the exalted tone of a Pythoness dealing forth terrible oracles, "is the eternal—the undying—the unquenchable vengeance of an outraged woman! There, sir—*now* you have learnt my secret—now you are acquainted with my motive—and now also you read the whole history of my shame! It was not my intention to have revealed to you all this: but you demanded a guarantee and I give you one! For, as truly as there is a God above us and

a Satan in the realms beneath us,—so surely will my vengeance endure until the lips which are giving utterance to these words shall be silenced by the cold hand of death, and until the heart which cherishes the fervid hope of crushing a wretch down unto the very dust, shall cease to beat in the silent tomb! Think you, then, that I will betray you?—think you that I shall prove a traitress to myself?"

"No—I do not entertain such a thought—*now* that you have spoken thus candidly," said Mr. Rigden. "I accept the guarantee—and I promise to make a good use of the documents," he added in a significant tone. "But will you not accept of any reward?"

"Not a farthing!" exclaimed the girl, proudly. "Do you not know a woman's mind better than to make her such a proposal after all I have just said to you? But it is useless to waste more time upon *that* point: for few are the beings of your sex who *do* appreciate the extent of virtue, love, and self-sacrifice of which a woman is capable—nor, on the other hand, comprehend the nature of the vengeance which she craves when outraged. Farewell, sir!"

With these words, the strange visitress took her departure, leaving Mr. Rigden as much amazed at her extraordinary character and proceedings as he was rejoiced at the object and result of the interview.

CHAPTER CLI.

THE MENDICANT FAMILY.

Upwards of a week had now passed since Mrs. Melmoth and her children were thrust forth into the open streets to beg their bread.

In Whitehall had they first taken their stand: and for hours not a penny was disbursed to them

by the passers-by—not a hand was stretched out to their relief.

If a carriage stopped near the place where the poor family had taken their stand, and if the elder boy ventured to creep towards the door with shivering limbs, naked feet, and tears rolling down his sunken cheeks, the rough stern voice of a flunkey wearing the ostentatious garb of a vile servitude, sent him back again cowering to his mother's side;—and the elegantly-dressed ladies in the vehicle would remark amongst themselves "how disagreeable it was to have the streets so terribly infested with beggars!"

And yet one poor sixpence from the purse of either of those magnificent dames would have been received with thankfulness—Oh! such thankfulness!

The shades of evening were already beginning to gather upon the mighty Babylon, when a poor female servant, out of place and seeking a situation, took compassion upon the wretched family; and having asked the mother a few questions, thrust a shilling into her hand. Mrs. Melmoth saw only *one* other shilling remaining in the tender-hearted young woman's purse; and she was loath to receive such generous alms from a good creature who was herself standing on the threshold of want. But the servant-maid darted away with tears streaming from her eyes;—and Mrs. Melmoth was enabled to procure a morsel of bread for her children and an asylum for the night.

But where was that night passed? In one of those filthy low lodging-houses which are supported by thieves, tramps, and mendicants, and to which poverty compels the honest to resort! Forced to herd with the vilest of the vile and the most degraded of all society's innumerable outcasts, Mrs. Melmoth gathered her children around her in a corner of the room which was filled to suffocation and the atmosphere of which was fetid enough to breathe a pestilence;—and while the young ones slept through sheer exhaustion, she could not withdraw her looks from that terrible and tremendous future into which they nevertheless plunged with horror and dismay.

For, what was to become of herself and children? Even if they remained beggars and subsisted by begging,—even if the wretched avocation of mendicancy should raise up a slight barrier between themselves and actual starvation,—what prospects were there for the poor innocents who now slept in her arms or with their heads upon her lap? Had the trade of the street-beggar no contamination?—was it not the apprenticeship for the more finished and perilous pursuits of the thief?—and how could she hope that *her* children would pass unharmed through the terrible ordeal?

Oh! her anguish knew no bounds when she thought of all this: and she wept in silence over her sleeping children——but, great God! what bitter tears were those which she thus shed in torrents! Talk of the pains of the rack—the question by water—the thumb-screw—and the iron boot;—talk of the agony attendant upon the most fearful surgical operations which are known to men;—talk of the mental excruciation endured at the instant when the criminal stands upon the drop with the executioner fastening the halter about his neck;—talk of the rapid gush of poignant feelings which traverse the brain of the drowning wretch,——Oh! all these were an enviable paradise compared with the rending misery which that poor woman suffered while thus she foreshadowed the appalling pictures of the future.

A night of brain-searing sensations was that which she passed;—and on the morrow she turned out into the streets again, holding the babe in her arms and with the other three children clinging to her scanty vesture.

Presently an old lady, followed by a handsome footman in gorgeous livery, passed slowly down Whitehall. The flunkey carried a French poodle in his arms—for the beast was so pampered as to be unable to walk; and the old lady would rather have heard that an entire city with hundreds of thousands of human creatures had been swallowed up by an earthquake, than that her obese poodle suffered the slightest ill-treatment. With stately step did the flunkey march behind his mistress: for *he* too was fat and sleek with good living—and there was a certain air of conscious importance about him, as if he were something more to the old lady than a mere footman. And just at the very moment that he was passing the poor family, he took a piece of rich cake from his pocket and held it conveniently to the dog's mouth so that the brute might eat it without the necessity of moving anything but its jaws;—and the old lady, glancing behind her, threw a look of approval upon the domestic when she saw how careful he was of her beloved poodle. But, Oh! what famished, eager, hungry looks did the poor children cast on that piece of nice rich cake which the dog ate so lazily and with such indifference! Then Mrs. Melmoth advanced—timidly advanced, with her sickly babe in her arms—and besought the lady to give her a few pence for the love of God! But the old dame absolutely shrank in disgust to the very edge of the pavement; and turning round to the domestic, bade him hurry on, "lest the dog should catch vermin or some nasty disease from those filthy beggars!"

Such were her words: and yet the poor woman and her children were as cleanly as poverty would allow them to be—aye, and although they had neither shoes nor stockings on their feet!

And the wealthy dame, who expended gold upon her beloved dog, passed rapidly on—followed by her pampered menial;—and on arriving at the house whither she was proceeding to pay a morning visit, she launched forth in a pathetic strain upon the shocking increase of beggars!

Anon there came a Bishop down Whitehall. His Lordship was on foot that day, because he had lent one of his carriages to the mistress whom he pensioned magnificently, and another to a married daughter whose prostitution to a Minister had obtained the reverend old gentleman his see. With an air half-dignified and half-sanctimonious did the Bishop advance,—wearing that sort of humility which seems to say, "Look at my meekness!"—and with a bunch of gold seals dangling over his silk apron. Having bestowed a haughty bend of the head upon a poor curate who bowed to the earth as he passed by,—this same curate performing more duties in a week at the rate of forty pounds a-year than the Bishop had done in all his life,—his Lordship's eyes fell upon the poor family. Timidly and tearfully—dragging herself along with a painfulness that was as evident as the sun shining over-head—did Mrs. Melmoth accost the proud prelate. But

that man of God—that religious old impostor who preached of Jesus riding on an ass and kept two carriages—that worldly hypocrite who denounced riches from the pulpit and received twenty thousand a-year from the labour, toil, and industry of the people—that hoary old sinner who voted for Sabbath-Bills while he kept a mistress and fattened upon the fruits of his daughter's adultery and shame,—this old Bishop it was who sternly bade the starving woman "go and work for her bread and not bring up her children in idleness!"

Then the man of God passed on his way, to lunch with another prelate and deplore the inefficiency of the laws to put down mendicants—nor trouble himself as to what the real meaning of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus may be.

Presently there passed down Whitehall two young officers arm-in-arm, — two of those aristocratic jackanapes who don the red coat ere they are well loosened from their titled mammas' apron-strings, and whose commissions in the army are procured *by purchase!* These lace-bedizened monkeys were smoking cigars—leering insolently at every pretty girl they met—fancying themselves irresistible in the trumpery gaud of their flaming apparel—and thinking it an excellent joke because they had been locked up all night in a watch-house for stealing knockers from front-doors. Humbly did the eldest boy of the starving family accost these gallant gentlemen who seemed to be laughing so good-humouredly: but the moment he dared to present the ragged and famished spectacle of his personal appearance to the noble notice of those lordlings, the one turned aside in disgust as if he sniffed the foul air of a pestilence, and the other looked anxiously round for a constable. In fine, they passed on without even throwing the poor boy a half-penny;—and within an hour they each lost a thousand pounds at cards and dice!

Soon afterwards the humble curate who saluted the Bishop with such profound respect and received so haughty an acknowledgment in return, — that same curate who preached three sermons every Sunday and attended to the duties of a large parish for forty pounds a-year,—returned slowly down Whitehall. He caught sight of the poor family — he paused and put his hand into his pocket. Heaven knows there was little enough *there;* and what there was he needed for his *own* poor family at home. But he drew forth a shilling;—and as a tear trembled upon the lash of the worthy man, he presented it to Mrs. Melmoth, saying in a tone tremulous with emotion, "My poor woman, I am sorry—very sorry that I can spare you no more. But——"

And, as his heart grew too full for farther utterance, the humble curate—the *real* minister of the lowly Jesus—hurried away to hide his feelings and escape the outpourings of gratitude which followed his sublime benevolence.

Then the Melmoth family broke their fast;—and the bread which the poor mother ate was moistened with her tears, as she contrasted in her mind the behaviour of the pompous Bishop and that of the hard-working, half-starved, and spirit-broken curate.

On returning to the station which she had chosen for her piteous pursuit in Whitehall, Mrs. Melmoth was speedily wrapt in a mournful reverie,—from which she was awakened by a private soldier who accosted her. He was a fine, tall, handsome fellow, whose noble form set off the uniform which he wore to far greater advantage than if it had been embellished by the insignia of an officer;—and his intellectual countenance, marked with an air of decision, contrasted strongly with the ignoble, dissipated, and effeminate looks of the two lordlings who had passed some hours previously. This private soldier—a man sprung from the common people, but one of nature's nobles—addressed Mrs. Melmoth in a kind manner; and, having uttered a few touching words of sympathy, he put in her hand all the money he possessed —a few halfpence—and walked rapidly away. Yet that man bore upon his back—beneath the King's uniform—the deep scars and the long wails indelibly imprinted on his flesh by the accursed cat-o'-nine-tails;—and he was likewise a marked man in his regiment, because he had been once caught reading a book written in praise of the French Revolution!

The curate's and the private soldier's money was all that the Melmoths obtained on the second day of their mendicant life;—and in the evening they returned to the low lodging-house where for a few pence they obtained shelter. The children soon slept: but the unhappy, almost heart-broken mother was some hours before she could close her eyes in slumber. And ere a feverish and uneasy rest came over her, she tried to pray—but she could not! No —she could not bring herself to pray: for she began to doubt the existence of a God. Never, never in all her life had she committed a deed of which she was ashamed: a good daughter had she been—a good wife and mother had she proved;—and wherefore, then, was she thus cruelly persecuted? Why was she doomed to behold her children less cared for by the world than a wretched poodle-dog?—wherefore was she so completely crushed, weighed down, and overpowered by an appalling sense of utter misery, that she wished herself dead—and already felt thoughts of suicide creeping into her brain, accompanied by terrible ideas of murder in respect to her children. No—she could not pray: she had no *hope* left—scarcely any *faith;*—and without faith in heaven and hope that it will hear the proffered prayer, how could she force her lips to frame the pious intercession?

And even if she could have prayed, Oh! what a place was it to pray in! Within the four walls of a low room, blackened by smoke, and filled with an atmosphere that seemed stagnant in its pestilential density, were crowded together the vilest specimens of all vile characters and the most miserable of the immense brotherhood of wretchedness. While the candle was still burning the looks of licentious effrontery which the women wore and the ferocious aspect of the men filled Mrs. Melmoth with mingled disgust and alarm;—and when the light was extinguished, the ribald discourse that was still continued for some time, seemed to derive fresh horrors from the darkness. And then she pictured to herself that the time must come when her boys would grow up to be as ruffian-like as those men—and her daughters as shameless and abandoned as those women! Oh! how could prayers ascend from such a place to the throne of the Eternal?—how could human lips venture to offer up either thanksgivings or entreaties from such a polluted atmosphere?

On the morrow the mendicant family issued forth again—and on this day did they glean from the

hand of humble charity enough to purchase bread and pay for the next night's shelter. For the well-dressed and the rich bestowed little or nothing—but either turned away in disgust, or else talked of constables and the House of Correction.

Six or seven days more passed in the same manner;—and thus was it that the wretched mother and the hapless children sustained an existence which they could not value, and learnt those bitter lessons that constitute the experience acquired by poverty.

One night,—the same as that on which the masquerade took place at Covent Garden Theatre,—the poor woman and her children were huddled as usual in the corner of the room. The light was extinguished: but the air felt hot and sickly in that crowded place. Mrs. Melmoth's two boys and the girl were sleeping soundly; and the sickly babe was endeavouring to draw some sustenance from her withered bosom. She herself was lost in one of those deep desponding moods which are broken from time to time by pangs of poignant anguish shooting through the heart and brain, as lightning flashes athwart the murky night;—when her attention was slowly and as it were insensibly drawn to the conversation which was going on amongst several of the other lodgers in that room. In fact, she found herself listening almost before she spontaneously gave her attention to the discourse;—but its nature speedily rivetted her curiosity with its fearful and appalling interest.

"What is that you're saying, Job Minks?" asked a fellow, arousing from his slumbers and catching something which had been uttered by the individual thus addressed.

"Why, he was a-telling of us a story that he's invented his-self and that I don't believe for a minute," said another.

"But I tell you that it's true," exclaimed the man who answered to the euphonious name of Job Minks; "and I not only heard it from a pal of mine this morning, but I read it in the paper at the Beggars' Staff where I happened to be in the afternoon."

"Well, what is it?" demanded the fellow who had just walked up. "I heerd you a-saying something about tearing up bodies from their graves——"

"And so I did," interrupted Minks; "and once more I tell you it's true. For the last three or four nights there have been bodies torn up from their graves in the burying-grounds of different parts of London;—and the corpses have been found all rent limb from limb and horribly mutilated."

"But who the devil can amuse his-self in such a fashion?" demanded the man who had so recently awakened.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you, Buss," answered Minks; "and the 'thorities would give their ears to find out. It seems that the first affair of the kind took place in Old St. Pancras churchyard four nights ago. When the sexton went to open the church in the morning for a weddin' that was to take place, to his horror and astonishment he saw a grave opened and the body lying on the top of the earth that had been thrown up. The corpse was that of an old gentleman who had been buried a few days before; and it was mutilated in a shocking manner. It was clear enough that the person who did all this must have had some implement to dig out the earth; for mutilation had been accomplished by a blunt instrument such as a spade."

"This is really dreadful," exclaimed Buss. "And yet I ain't a feller to be shocked at a trifle, neither."

It is almost needless to observe that Mrs. Melmoth shuddered with an indescribable horror throughout her entire being, as she listened to this appalling narrative. Her poverty—her misery—and even the wretchedness of her children were forgotten for the moment in the fearful interest which absorbed all her faculties and sensations;—and the perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow. The hideous nature of the narrative acquired a deeper and more tremendous interest from the fact that it was told in the midst of a profound darkness, and in a place thronged with characters of the vilest and most polluted description. In a word, the effect produced upon her was as if a loathsome snake were slowly coiling itself around her person, enveloping her closer and closer in its slimy folds and exhaling its pestilential breath in her face, while every moment she expected its head would come in cold and clammy contact with her cheek. Such was the revolting sensation excited by the scarcely credible tale that the man was recounting.

"Dreadful, indeed!" he exclaimed, in ejaculatory echo of the remark made by his friend Buss. "There never was such a thing known before: at least so the papers say. For, mark you—this is no affair in which resurrection-men are engaged—nor yet robbers. Body-snatchers don't leave the corpse behind them;—and the day's gone by when people were buried with rings on their fingers. So it ain't for the anatomy-shops that it's done; neither is it thieves that do it."

"Then what can it be for?" demanded Buss.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you," responded Job Minks. "The second affair took place in Shoreditch churchyard; and the third it St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green. In this last place, two bodies were found torn up out of their graves—horribly mutilated, and with the winding-sheets rent to shreds. There's quite a panic in all those neighbourhoods, I can tell you."

"No wonder," observed Buss.

"But what are the 'thorities going to do?" asked another listener.

"What can they do, but fill the burying-grounds with man-traps and spring-guns and set a watch at night," exclaimed Job Minks. "The papers say that this has been done in most of the churchyards in London and the suburbs; and so the chap, whoever he is, will be pretty sure to be caught. The resurrectionists, too, must take care of themselves now," added Minks; "or they'll be getting riddled with bullets or have their legs caught in a trap. In Old St. Pancras there's a watch set with blood-hounds."

"And this is really true—and no larking, Job?" said Buss, still incredulous.

"Well—all I can say is that a pal of mine told me of it first," was the answer; "and then I read all about it in a newspaper that Carrotty Poll lent me at the Staff in Horslydown."

"Them's your vouchers, eh?" observed Buss. "Well, I don't say that I shan't believe it: but I must confess it's precious startling. Your pal might have read it also—and we know the papers tell the most infernal lies sometimes."

"So they do," exclaimed Job Minks: "but let me tell you that my pal didn't read it at all, for the plain and simple reason that he can't read. Neither did he have it read to him; but it was the sexton of Old St. Pancras which told him all about it--seeing that he went to bury his sister there yesterday morning."

"Ah! that's different," observed Buss. "But I s'pose it's some Bedlamite that's broke loose and is amusing his-self in this uncommon style?"

"Or else it must be a cannibal," suggested another listener.

"Or p'r'aps some desperate wretch driven by sheer starvation to dig up dead bodies and eat them," remarked a third.

"It may be a madman—but it is not a cannibal," said Minks: "for it don't appear that he has made a meal on the corpses. His delight seems to be to hack and hew them to pieces; and in all this there's what the papers call a fiendish revelry in the horrible pastime of exhuming and mutilating the dead."

"Shall I tell you what *I* think of the matter?" exclaimed a voice which Mrs. Melmoth did not remember to have heard previously joining in the conversation.

"Is that you, old Tiddleywink?" demanded Buss. "Why, I thought you was fast asleep long ago. I heerd you a-snoring."

"No, you didn't—it was somebody else," was the reply. "I've been listening all along to every word our friend Minks has been telling us—and what is more, I believe every word too. For the whole thing puts me in mind of certain accounts that I have read in books; and you'll find out in the long run that the hands which are now exhuming bodies and mutilating them so horribly, are not those of a madman—nor yet of a cannibal—nor yet of a desperate wretch goaded on by starvation."

These remarks were made with a solemnity and an emphasis which produced a strange and awe-inspiring effect upon all who heard them; and a deep silence of more than a minute ensued. That silence, following so closely upon the hideous narrative which had just been related, had in it something of a tomb-like horror and a sepulchral gloom—especially when the idea was associated with that of the pitchy darkness which prevailed in the chamber.

Mrs. Melmoth felt her blood curdling in her veins; and as she pressed the now sleeping babe more closely to her bosom, she shrank up as it were within herself, as if she fancied that the cold hand of a corpse was about to clutch her by the shoulder.

"And so them's your opinions, old Tiddleywink—be they?" exclaimed Buss, at length breaking silence. "But I s'pose, since you speak with such a air of authority, you can wentur' a guess as to who or what it is that has been playing such precious pranks with the dead 'uns?"

"Well—I *have* an opinion on that point," said the individual thus appealed to; "and you may depend upon it that the result will show I hav'n't been far wrong. For, according to what I've read in books—and you must remember I was a schoolmaster once, before the tyranny of the parson of the parish ruined me and I was driven out into the streets to become, *first* a beggar—and *then* a member of that class of people who find things before they are lost——"

"A wery delicate way of expressin' the noble perfession of prig and buzgloak," interjected the man who rejoiced in the name of Buss.

"Come—don't stop him with observations in that manner," cried Job Minks. "What was you going to say, old feller?"

"Simply *this*," was the response: "that according to what I've read in books, it is not by any means the first or the twentieth time that instances have occurred of graves being opened—bodies dragged forth—and horrible mutilations accomplished. In England, perhaps, the thing is rare: but on the continent it has been frequent enough. And the perpetrator of these atrocities is not a resurrectionist—nor a thief—nor a madman—nor a cannibal—nor a starving wretch made desperate by hunger: no—it is nothing of all these, I can assure you!"

"Then what is it?" demanded several voices, with that shuddering accent which denotes a presentiment of some appalling reply to the question put.

"What is it?" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled horror and solemnity: "it is a being of whom you have all doubtless heard, but whose existence may have seemed fabulous—a being whose very name is sufficient to make the blood run cold and the hair stand on end!"

"But this being—what is it?" again cried many voices.

"A Vampyre!" was the astounding answer.

Ejaculations of horror followed this announcement; and Mrs. Melmoth felt a sensation come over her as if she were about to faint.

"Yes—the perpetrator of those atrocities which you have heard related this night," continued the ex-schoolmaster, "must be none other than a Vampyre. And now that you know there is a Vampyre in London, I warn you to take care of yourselves—how you pass through churchyards by night—how you trust yourselves in lonely places near suburban cemeteries—aye, and how you sleep in dark rooms without knowing who are your companions and who may happen to be huddled up alongside of you!"

"Good God! is there any danger of such a thing?" exclaimed Buss, starting up from the wretched flock mattress on which he was stretched.

"Danger!" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled irony and terror: "to be sure there is! Can you doubt it? Do you know—or do you *not* know of what a Vampyre is capable? Well—I will explain it to you. He will insinuate himself into a company such as our's now present—he will sit down and converse in the most agreeable manner—he will hire a lodging for the night in the same room,——for example, in such a place as this,——and he will stretch himself down on his mattress like all the rest of us. Then, when the light is put out and everybody else is sleeping, this Vampyre will either strangle some unfortunate wretch at once, or else will fasten his teeth upon his flesh while still living and begin to drink his blood! This is what a Vampyre will do: and now I should like to know whether people of our stamp, who are forced to frequent these kind of places, should be cautious or not?"

Renewed ejaculations of horror burst from those on whose ears this fearful description and awful warning fell;—and Mrs. Melmoth, though a woman of good sterling common sense, felt herself overwhelmed with terrors which in the broad sun-light and the open air would not have exercised even a moment's influence upon her. But in the midst of that deep darkness—in the society of wretches of the lowest and most depraved character—and with her

mind previously attenuated by her own harrowing thoughts and desponding reflections, she naturally became an easy prey to the dominion of that horrible superstitious alarm which seized upon all the rest.

"By God!" exclaimed Buss, "I would sooner walk about the streets all night than run the risk of encountering the Vampyre in a lodging-house."

While he was yet speaking, the door of the room was opened; and some one entered.

"Vampyre!" cried the new-comer, closing the door behind him—and it was the voice of a man that thus spoke: "who the devil is talking of Vampyres?—and what do you know of them?"

But at that same instant an ejaculation burst from the lips of some female in the room;—and then all was still.

"What was that?" said Job Minks, after a pause, during which the silence of the tomb had prevailed.

"It was some woman frightened by old Tiddley-wink's description of the Vampyre," observed one of the occupants of the chamber.

"Well, it struck me to be rather a cry of joy at something or another," said the ex-schoolmaster: "though what anybody could have to rejoice at in such a place and at this hour, I cannot well understand. But who is the new-comer? Let him announce himself in a proper manner: for it has become necessary to take all kinds of precautions in respect to strangers."

"Well," said the voice of the individual who had just entered; "you may call me Toby Firebrand—for that's the name I'm known by amongst my pals. But how the devil am I to grope my way to a mattress?"

"There's none in this part of the room," said Buss.

"Nor yet here," added Job Minks.

"And there isn't a hair's-breadth of space to spare in this corner," exclaimed the ex-schoolmaster.

"Ah! I suppose you take me for the Vampyre you were all talking about when I entered the chamber a minute ago?" said the new-comer, with a mocking laugh. "But what made the old landlady assure me that there was plenty of room in this chamber? I'll go and make her refund me my halfpence and then take myself off to another place. So good night to ye all!"

And with these words the individual who had announced himself as Toby Firebrand, took his departure, slamming the door behind him.

The noise recalled Mrs. Melmoth to her senses: for she it was who had given utterance to that ejaculation which followed the entrance of Toby Firebrand—and she had fainted immediately afterwards.

Collecting her scattered ideas as well as she was able, she strove to ascertain whether a certain impression which was uppermost in her mind was a feature in a troubled dream or a fact which had really occurred.

"That voice—surely it was Melmoth's?" she said to herself a hundred times in a minute: and then, as the whole conversation which she had overheard respecting the Vampyre came back to her memory, the very words which Toby Firebrand had uttered likewise flashed to her recollection.

"*Vampyre!—who the devil is talking of Vampyres?—and what do you know of them?*"

Yes—these were the words he had spoken;—and if she could thus recall them so accurately to her mind, and if they so closely connected themselves with the previous conversation, she felt tolerably well assured that the impression left upon her brain was no delusion.

And this impression was that the new-comer was none other than her husband—that husband who had been so ruthlessly torn from her by the despotic authority of the Home Office, and whom she supposed to be far away! Oh! if it were indeed he—if it were really his voice which she had heard, and which had suddenly sounded like welcome music to her ear through the deep darkness of the night and the hot atmosphere of that miserable chamber,—if, in fine, the father of her mendicant children was actually restored to her, and was there—in that very room—perhaps close by her side—at all events not many feet distant from the corner where she lay crouched up,—oh! if this were indeed the case, what happiness now awaited her!

So powerfully wrought were her feelings as these thoughts traversed her mind, that she could not immediately give utterance to the question which her lips nevertheless strove hard to breathe. For she knew not that during the brief interval of her unconsciousness, the man whose voice elicited that ejaculation of joy from her tongue, had taken his departure to seek some other lodging for the night.

"Melmoth?—does any one answer to the name of Melmoth?" she at length inquired, in a faltering tone and with deep suspense at the heart.

But no one replied to the query.

"Who are you asking for, my good woman?" said the ex-schoolmaster, after a long pause. "There doesn't appear to be any person of such a name in the place."

"But that man—who came in just now—at the moment when you were all discoursing on a frightful topic?" observed Mrs. Melmoth, in a half-stifling voice and with cruel palpitations of the heart.

"Oh! he went away immediately again," returned the ex-schoolmaster. "He said his name was Toby Firebrand—and as there wasn't room for him in this place, he took his departure."

Mrs. Melmoth said nothing more: her feelings were suffocating—for scarcely had a gleam of hope flashed athwart the gloom of her prospects, when it disappeared in an instant. But at the next moment she was consoled, and indeed cheered by the remembrance that her husband was at all events in London: for that it was *his* voice which she had heard, she felt convinced.

Not once did she close her eyes in slumber that night;—and so soon as the first solitary and wire-drawn glimmering of day stole into the chamber, she aroused her children from their sleep. Then in their ears did she whisper the glad tidings that their father was returned and that they might hope to see him soon;—and it was therefore with lighter hearts than usual that they all sallied forth from the low lodging-house to wander about the metropolis in search of a husband and a parent.

CHAPTER CLII.

THE MILLINER AND THE HANDSOME FOOTMAN.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the masquerade; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her parlour, pondering upon the various difficulties which surrounded her.

In the first place there was Mobbs, who would evidently become a rapacious extortioner: then there was Frederick Dray, who had already darted amorous glances upon her, and had lost all the respect with which he had formerly been wont to treat her;—next there was Harriet, who, although faithful and devoted, must nevertheless be provided for;—and lastly, there was the chance of some unlucky or providential circumstance transpiring to afford a trace to the murder of the head constable of Bow Street. In fact, the wretched milliner not only found herself completely in the power of three persons who would look to her purse as a constant means for supplying all their wants; but she likewise felt that she should ever be exposed to the insolence of Mobbs, the arrogance of the footman, and the pretensions of the lady's-maid.

Mobbs was to return in the evening. What would he require of her?—and how should she act? Frederick Dray's murderous intention of the preceding night had been defeated in the manner already described: and Mrs. Brace knew not whether the footman still entertained the same project. She shuddered when she thought that he possibly might;—and yet there was a secret hope at the bottom of her soul that he had *not* abandoned the idea of assassination. For if Mobbs were put out of the way, the most brutal of the three depositors of her secret would be removed from her path;—and *then*——Oh! did not the thought steal into the mind of the wretched woman that she might perhaps find means to silence Frederick Dray *likewise* for ever!

So true is the saying that one crime needs a dozen others to conceal it!

Then again,—if once those two depositors of her secret were thus removed,—might she not dispose of her establishment—realise her property—and repair to America? Harriet was no particular object of alarm, and might accompany her. Yes—this was an excellent plan;—and the milliner even found heart enough to smile as it slowly developed itself in her thoughts.

She was in the midst of this reverie, when the door opened and Frederick Dray entered the room.

His countenance wore a sinister expression which instantly produced a disagreeable effect upon Mrs. Brace and caused a sensation of uneasiness to creep over her. She half started from her chair—then sank back into it: and, fixing her eyes intently upon the man's features, she endeavoured to read all that was passing in his mind.

"Madam, are we not to have a few minutes' conversation together?" he said, lounging negligently against the high back of an arm-chair: "for I think I understood from you that the scoundrel Mobbs is to return to-night."

"Yes—he will return," answered Mrs. Brace; "and—as you say, Frederick——we—we—must deliberate——"

"Don't labour under any embarrassment with me, my dear madam," interrupted the footman: "henceforth we must row in the same boat, if we wish to save our necks from a halter."

And, without any farther ceremony, he deposited himself quietly and comfortably in the arm-chair opposite to the one occupied by his mistress;—and leaning back, he stretched out his legs towards the fire just for all the world as if he were the master of the house.

"You have some plan in your head, then, Frederick?" observed Mrs. Brace, not daring to remonstrate with him for his impertinence.

"Plan!—egad, I've got it all cut and dried, my dear madam," returned the footman, in a flippant, self-sufficient, off-hand manner;—"and I hope that it will suit you in all its details."

"Proceed," said the milliner, already suspecting that Dray was revolving in his mind something more than even the murder of Mobbs, and that he had ulterior views beyond the mere disposal of the ex-constable.

"In the first place, my dear lady," continued Frederick, in a tone of familiarity, "let us thoroughly understand the point from which we are to start. In plain terms, then," he added, fixing his eyes keenly upon her countenance,—"Peter Grumley did *not* die of apoplexy—but you murdered him!"

"You dare not thus accuse me!" exclaimed the milliner, in a hoarse choking voice—while her magnificent bust heaved and fell with a long convulsive movement.

"What is the use of entertaining *me* with such language as that?" demanded Dray, his whole manner denoting an insolent confidence. "Did you not ask me last night whether *this additional crime* was necessary? But that admission on your part only confirmed the suspicions that already dwelt in my mind. Besides, did you not lend yourself to my plan to make away with Mobbs?—and if you had not previously done a trifle in the murder way, would you have fallen so easily into the latter scheme? But what difference does it make, after all? The corpse lies buried in *this* house—and, if discovered, will be enough to get us all hanged."

"What, then, do you propose?" asked Mrs. Brace, no longer daring to dispute with the footman relative to the mode in which Grumley met his death.

"I propose to let Mobbs follow his superior officer," responded Dray, with a significant smile. "And now you see how much I am risking on your account, my dear lady: for nothing would be easier than for me to take myself off to America and leave you to deal with this Mobbs as best you may. But as I am confident he is not to be trusted—but will either betray the secret in a drunken moment, or else out of revenge the very first time you refuse to satisfy his extortionate demands—I therefore propose to put him out of your way altogether."

"And how—that is—by what plan——" faltered Mrs. Brace, in a low thick tone.

"Not in a way that will shed blood and leave traces upon the floor," answered the footman. "Whatever we do, must be done safely. I suppose you poisoned Peter Grumley? Well—an excellent method too. Nothing more useful than a few drops of Prussic acid to have in one's house. Ah! I see by your manner, then, that Prussic acid it was. But I am afraid that Mobbs may smell a rat. He will be suspicious—upon his guard: and depend upon it,

he won't drink at your house again—or if he does, it will only be what he sees you drink likewise—aye, and *first* also. However—an idea strikes me! Do you think he will want to go down into the back kitchen again?"

"It is impossible for me to say," replied the milliner. "But, doubtless—if you particularly wished—I could entice him thither—upon some pretence——"

"Be it so—and leave all the rest to me!" exclaimed Frederick. "He shall be made away with as assuredly as his name is Mobbs—and when he lies under the stone along with Peter Grumley, I will guarantee that not a trace of the deed shall be left behind. And now, my dear Mrs. Brace, with your leave I will take a glass of your excellent champagne, just to put me into spirits to unfold the rest of my plans."

The milliner rose mechanically from her seat—opened a cupboard—brought forth the wine—drew the cork—and filled a glass for Frederick Dray, as he reclined in lolling indolence in the arm-chair. Yes—the mistress waited upon the domestic;—and the elegant, fashionable milliner of Pall Mall—the friend of the Prince of Wales and the depositress of many a noble lady's secrets and many an aristocratic frailty—was now in servile attendance upon her own lacquey!

"You are as amiable and captivating in manners as you are agreeable in person," said he, as he looked amorously over the glass which he was raising to his lips.

Mrs. Brace now awoke as it were from a dream: or rather, her mind shook off the numbness which had crept upon it while the footman was detailing with such cold-blooded calmness his designs relative to Mobbs. She then perceived the immense error she had committed in so far compromising her dignity as to obey the man's commands relative to the wine, instead of at once taking a proper stand and assuming a decided attitude to convince him that there were certain limits beyond which he must not pass in his bearing towards her, no matter how grave were the interests that linked them. But, by at once succumbing to his arrogance, she had suffered him to gain a tremendous advantage over her; and it was now no easy task to regain the ground which she had lost.

"Have the kindness to proceed with whatever you may have to say to me, Frederick," she observed at length: "for should any one come in, the familiar manner which you have assumed towards me would excite the strangest suspicions."

"Familiar manner, indeed!" echoed Dray, in an offended tone. "Well—upon my word, that is rather an assumption on your part. Am I not about to commit a crime and endanger my safety in this world and my salvation in the next, entirely on your account? And do you think that I anticipate no reward? As a matter of course. Such a deed is worth its price; and that price must be paid to me."

"What recompense is it that you claim?" asked the milliner.

"Your hand, my dear—your hand in honourable marriage," replied Dray, sipping his champagne with a *nonchalant* ease and stretching out his legs with the air of a Home Secretary when giving a refusal to a deputation imploring that the life of some convict may be spared.

"Marriage!" echoed Mrs. Brace, in mingled anger and amazement: but instantly recollecting herself, she said, "Surely you are not in earnest, Frederick? I thought you intended to marry Harriet."

"Harriet was all very well a little while ago, my dear lady," returned the man, with a supercilious air and an affected drawl: "but circumstances have transpired, you understand, to enable me to look to a more elevated position. You are a handsome woman—a very handsome woman; and I shall be proud of you as a wife. I am not particularly ill-favoured; and you need not be ashamed of me as a husband."

"But remember that I am older than you, Frederick—some years older," said Mrs. Brace, making a feint to contest a point which she was prepared to yield eventually—but only because she was now more than ever determined to rid herself of this importunate accomplice so soon as an opportunity should serve.

"Well—you may be a little older, my dear," observed Dray, growing more familiar alike in his manner and his language: "but you are a splendid creature—and I long to pillow my head on that superb bosom which now sinks and rises so gently. Ah! often when I have stood behind your chair at dinner or supper-time, and looked over your shoulders to catch a glimpse of that bosom, I have thought to myself how happy should I be if you would only take a fancy to me. Then, when I have looked into your fine eyes, and beheld your beautiful white teeth shining between your moist red lips, I have felt such strange sensations come over me that I have more than once resolved to steal to your chamber in the middle of the night and either persuade or force you to submit to my wishes. And now at last—at last," continued Dray, his imagination heated with the wine which he was drinking and to which he was so utterly unaccustomed,—"at last I stand upon the threshold of that gratification which I have so often and so deeply coveted. Ah! my dearest creature, you are indeed worthy that I should commit a crime to serve you—even though that crime be murder: but, on the other hand, you will not say that I am unworthy of an adequate reward?"

"No—I will not prove ungrateful to you, Frederick," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming a tender tone and fixing upon him an amorous look: though, notwithstanding the ardour of her lascivious nature, and despite of the fact that Dray was really a handsome young man, she experienced not the slightest inclination nor the faintest sensual impulse in his favour.

"Then you will consent to become my wife, dear Fanny?" said the man;—and, placing the glass upon the table, he rose from his seat—approached the milliner—threw his arms about her neck—and fastened his lips greedily to her own.

"You naughty fellow, be quiet," said Mrs. Brace, gently repulsing him. "Let us do all that we have agreed upon—and then we shall have leisure and opportunity to talk of love. Come—finish your champagne and retire: because I have several matters to attend to. And, by the bye, you will not say a word to Harriet at present——"

"No—it is not worth while," remarked Frederick. "And yet the sooner I put the poor girl out of suspense, the better: for to tell you the real truth, she is in a certain way——"

"Ah! I suspected as much!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "Now really, Frederick, this is not generous on your part——"

"It may be ungenerous," he interrupted, surveying himself in the mirror over the mantel and caressing his whiskers: "but it would be far more stupid on my part to go and marry a low servant-girl who will present me with a child five months after our union, to the infinite amusement of all my waggish friends and joke-loving acquaintances."

"She is a genteel girl—and a pretty one," observed Mrs. Brace. "There is nothing low about her;—and as for the other matter—why, it is easily alleged that you had been privately married for the last six months."

"The thing won't do, my dear—'pon my soul, it won't!" said Dray. "I couldn't fling myself away in that unconscionable manner;—nor can I afford to lose such a dear, handsome, voluptuous creature as you are. No—what you and I have already settled is a bargain; and you must leave me to manage Harriet. So no more remonstrances upon that head And now, what time is Mobbs to be here this evening?"

"He did not say," replied Mrs. Brace: "but I suppose that he will make his appearance soon after ten."

"Very well," exclaimed the footman. "Then you will entice him down into the back kitchen at about eleven—and not before. I shall be there—or else concealed close by. Don't ask me any questions now; for I have my plan ready cut and dried in my head—and I'll be bound to execute it properly. Of course you will take care to have all the servants in bed by half-past ten o'clock—except the chambermaid and the hall-porter belonging to the other house; and they won't be near to interfere with us. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," was the response.

"Then one kiss more, love," said Dray; "and

I will leave you for the present to attend to your own affairs."

The milliner resigned her lips to the pressure of his own;—and the self-sufficient footman then withdrew.

CHAPTER CLIII.

MOBBS AND HIS DOG AGAIN.

The clocks at the West End were chiming the half-hour after ten at night, when Mr. Mobbs was ushered by Frederick Dray into the parlour where Mrs. Brace was awaiting his arrival.

The footman retired immediately: but ere he closed the door, he darted a keen, rapid, and significant glance at the milliner, to assure her that he had in no wise changed his mind in respect to the matter agreed upon between them.

Mobbs was followed by his dog, which he kicked savagely under a sofa, while he deposited himself in the same arm-chair that the footman had occupied with so much indolence a few hours previously;—and, dropping his hat upon the carpet, he said, "Our business was interrupted in a queer manner last night, ma'am."

"Yes—and before you had stipulated the price of your secrecy in a certain affair, Mr. Mobbs," returned the milliner. "But the night is cold again: will you not take something to warm you?"

"Perhaps you'll have the kindness to tell me, ma'am, in the fust instance," said Mobbs, fixing his looks searchingly upon Mrs. Brace, "how my pal and superior, Peter Grumley, came by his death? I mean, in what way you did the job?"

"Is it necessary to revert to all those horrors?" exclaimed the milliner. "Surely—surely, enough has already been said upon that most afflicting subject?"

"I told you last night that I must know all—and that I would then make terms with you," said Mobbs, in a dogged tone of determination. "Give me every explanation: 'cause it's natural that I should want to learn all the particklers connected with a matter that has deprived me of so good a friend. Come, ma'am—I don't suppose you did it without assistance: at all events, if you made away with him by your own hand alone, you could not have buried him beneath that there stone in the back kitchen, unless you had help. So you see that you've a good deal yet to tell me."

"But if you are really inclined to make terms with me," said Mrs. Brace, now alarmed lest the man suspected her murderous designs towards himself and was laying some trap to ensnare her beforehand,—"of what earthly use is it to you to ascertain all those particulars."

"Don't be afeard of anything wrong, my dear lady," replied Mobbs. "I haven't the least intention to harm you or your accomplices, provided you deal fairly, frankly, and openly with me. But I would have you to know that I can see as far into a brick wall as most people;—and I am therefore not blind to the fact that you *must* have had at least one confederate in the deed—or else in the concealment of the body."

"And if this were true?" said Mrs. Brace, trembling all over.

"Then I must be paid for keeping a secret that would hang *two* persons," replied Mobbs. "Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered the milliner, breathing more freely.

"And I must know the name of your accomplice—who he is—where he lives—and all about him," proceeded Mobbs: "because—to speak plainly at once—I must have a handsome annuity from both of you."

"And suppose that I did the deed by myself—totally unassisted and alone?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Very likely you did," returned Mobbs, laconically. "In fact, I should think it most probable that you pisoned him: and—no offence, ma'am—but that's precisely the reason why *I* should rayther decline taking anything either short or warm, unless it was a sip out of a glass which you'd tasted fust."

"Good God! Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the milliner, with well affected horror and indignation; "you do not—you cannot suppose for a moment that I am capable of doing you a mischief—*you* who have behaved so kindly towards me?"

"Well, I don't say that you *would*, ma'am," observed the ex-constable: "but at the same time I can't say that you *wouldn't*. Howsomever, we won't dwell upon that point. You admit, then,—or I'll take it for granted—that you pisoned poor Grumley in a glass of liquor or what not? Well—but you couldn't raise a stone—dig a grave—put in the corpse—fill up the hole—replace the stone—and dispose of the extra soil,—you couldn't do all this, I say, without assistance: and therefore I want to know who *did* assist you."

"Mr. Mobbs, I will not deceive you any longer," said Mrs. Brace, affecting the mingled confusion and frankness of one who has been playing a game of duplicity but is now determined to act with candour and sincerity. "The fact is that your late master has not as yet been buried at all; and for the simple reason that I have not dared to make any one a confidant in this dreadful business."

"Then where is the corpse?" demanded Mobbs roughly.

"In a place adjoining that very kitchen to which I conducted you last night," returned the milliner. "Oh! if you would only assist me to dispose of the body!" she exclaimed, in a well-assumed paroxysm of anguish, clasping her hands with apparent earnestness at the same time.

"Well—I dare say we can manage this business," said Mobbs. "But how came you to deceive me so grossly and so uselessly?"

"I will deal honestly with you *now*, at all events," replied the milliner. "The truth is that I hoped to be able to get rid of the corpse in some way or another—either by burning it—or else nerving myself with sufficient courage to take some one into my confidence. Then, had you ever turned round upon me and proclaimed that the corpse of a murdered man lay beneath the pavement of the back kitchen, the result of a search would have refuted your evidence and indeed stamped it with falsehood. These were my motives for misleading you, Mr. Mobbs: but I hope you will pardon me."

"Well, well," said the man, altogether deluded by the apparent contrition which marked the manner of Mrs. Brace, and by the air of sincerity with

which she spoke: "it is useless to blame you—'cause that won't mend matters. So, after all, you had no accomplice whatsomever?"

"Not any," replied Mrs. Brace.

"And the corpse still remains above ground?" added Mobbs, inquiringly.

"Yes—in a small dark place adjoining the back kitchen, and of which I have got the key," was the answer.

"Now, should you think a thousand pounds too much to give me for helping you to get rid of the corpse and for keeping your secret ever afterwards?" demanded the ex-constable, fixing his eyes keenly upon the milliner's countenance.

"A thousand pounds!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, affecting surprise at this specimen of exorbitance. "Oh! Mr. Mobbs, where do you think I am to get such a sum all in a moment?"

"Well—I don't require it all down upon the nail," observed the man: "but half now, and half in a fortnit."

"I suppose that you must have your own way—I am completely in your power—completely!" said the milliner, in a tone of lamentation. "But you will first help me to dispose of the body?"

"Oh! that's a part of the bargain," replied Mobbs. "And what you said to deceive me, shall now be done in earnest. I mean that we'll bury the corpse under the stones in the back kitchen—unless you've any better plan in view."

"No—I can suggest nothing better," returned the milliner: then, glancing at the time-piece on the mantel, she said, "It is now eleven o'clock, and all the servants have no doubt retired to their rooms."

"Well and good," observed Mobbs, rising from his seat: "we'll go and do our work at once—and then you shall hand me over the shiners."

Mrs. Brace took up a candle and led the way down to the back kitchen, followed by Mobbs at whose heels the dog trotted along. All was still—all was silent, in the lower region of the establishment; and the place was lighted only by the candle which the milliner carried in her hand.

On reaching the back kitchen, she cast her eyes hurriedly around: but Frederick Dray was not there. For an instant she was confounded: but the next moment recovering her presence of mind, she recollected he had said that if he were not in the place itself, he should be close by. And at the same time that this reflection flashed to her brain, she observed that a rope had been passed through a hook in the ceiling, and that one end was fastened to a nail in the upright plank supporting a row of shelves.

The dog began smelling round the stone, as on the former occasion; and Mobbs, struck by this circumstance, remarked that "it was singular the beast should get upon such a false scent." Then, as he caught a glimpse of some peculiarity about the mortar which fixed the stone in its setting, he stooped down and touched it with his finger.

At the same instant a side-door, communicating with a closet used to hold fire-wood, was dashed open,—and Frederick Dray, springing forth, threw himself with all his power upon the ex-constable.

"At him, Toby!" thundered the man, as he struggled desperately beneath the strong and vigorous Dray: but the dog only drew back into a corner, and growled with a low, savage, menacing, and continuous sound, as if on the point of flying at the assailant of his master.

But all that now took place was the work of a few moments—the terrible work of a wondrously short space, considering the tremendous magnitude of the deed.

For Mrs. Brace, with extraordinary presence of mind, hastened to succour the murderous proceeding of her domestic. Depositing the candle upon the dresser, she unfastened the rope from the nail, so that it ran through the hook in the ceiling, and the other end, which was formed into a noose, hung down within reach of Frederick Dray.

Meantime this desperate man had succeeded in keeping Mobbs down upon the pavement of the kitchen; and grasping his victim's head with both his hands, he raised it a little and then dashed it down with such savage violence upon the stones as to produce a stunning effect. Then, snatching at the noose, he slipped it over the ex-constable's head; and, instantaneously drawing it tight about his neck, sprang to his feet. At the same moment new life appeared to animate Mobbs; and likewise raising himself up before Dray could possibly prevent him, he struggled to release his neck from the rope.

But the murderer snatched the cord from Mrs. Brace and pulled it tight—retreating at the same time to a distance from the spot where the victim was writhing, and plunging, and struggling desperately: while the milliner, getting behind the miserable ex-constable, caught hold of his arms and pinioned him.

The distortions of the man's countenance were horrible: but not a cry escaped him—not a word could he utter. The noose was strangling him: and while the foam came from his lips—the tongue lolled out—and the eyes were starting from his head, the murderer pulled him up till his head came in violent contact with the hook through which the halter ran.

Awful were the writhings of the strangling wretch, as he raised the arms on which Mrs. Brace had been compelled to abandon her hold;—and frightful were the workings of the countenance that was now livid, swollen, and marked with veins that seemed like knotted cords beneath the skin. But in a few moments his arms dropped by his side—the convulsions of his body and the drawing up of his legs rapidly lost their spasmodic violence—and, after a long quivering of the entire frame and a nervous working of the fingers, all motion ceased!

But while this hideous tragedy was in progress, the dog had emerged from the corner; and, when his master was hoisted into the air, the animal leapt up at him to lick his hand—a moaning noise now superseding the continuous growl of menace which its mouth had previously sent forth.

When, however, the poor beast saw that Mobbs had become motionless and was dangling to the ceiling like a bundle of clothes, an instinctive feeling seemed to make the dog aware that it's master was dead; and sneaking into the remotest, darkest corner, it began to whine in a piteous manner.

"For heaven's sake, silence that brute, Frederick!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, who was trembling all over and the ghastly pallor of whose countenance appeared through the vermeil tint which art had shed upon her cheeks. "It will alarm the house."

The footman seized the poker and advanced towards the dog: but the beast, apparently comprehending his hostile intention, rushed past him and sprang up the stairs.

"I will go and let the animal out," said Frederick, taking up the candle.

"My God! do not leave me here all alone—and in the dark!" cried Mrs. Brace, with imploring voice and manner: and she hurried after the footman, pursued by an appalling terror lest the dead man should descend from his halter and creep stealthily behind her.

On reaching the summit of the kitchen stairs she paused and clung to the railings for support,—a complete consternation now overpowering her and making her feel as if she were walking in a dream. For all the horrors of that most horrible drama in which she had just played so prominent a part, appeared suddenly to accumulate upon her head,—concentrating all their fury—all their intensity—all their direst, deepest, most penetrating influence, in order the more thoroughly to harrow up her soul and wring her breast with ineffable tortures. Her brain was on fire—barbed arrows were inflicting their agonies upon her heart—every nerve, fibre, and tendon was strung to a degree of tension producing an effect as if the chords which bound her to existence were all scorching in flames and would part, snap, and shrivel up in an instant!

Meantime Frederick Dray had been looking about in the passage and the hall in search of the dog: but the animal was nowhere to be found. He went into the neighbouring rooms the doors of which stood open: he looked under all the furniture and behind the curtains;—but all in vain. The mongrel was not there;—and, muttering an imprecation against the dog, the footman returned to his mistress, whom he found in a most deplorable condition. She had sunk upon the top stair of the kitchen flight, and was cowering down in a bent position with her hands upon her knees and her eyes glaring wildly. But the moment the light which Dray carried in his hand illumined the darkness again, and when she found that her companion in crime was once more by her side, she recovered herself somewhat.

But Dray, perceiving how strong a hold her terrors had gained upon her, and how speedily all their influence would be revived by even the most trifling cause, concealed from her the fact that he had not found the dog;—and in answer to a question concerning the brute, he at once assured her that he had put it out of the house.

Catching some portion of the desperate energy and cold-blooded hardihood which inspired that bold bad man, she raised herself up from the stair and begged him to lead the way to her own parlour that she might procure some brandy. This was done;—and she now felt equal to assist in the work which was yet to be performed.

Descending once more to the back kitchen, the murderer and murderess commenced the remaining act of their appalling drama. First they lowered the corpse: then Frederick Dray set to work to raise the stone which covered the remains of Peter Grumley. The shovelling out of the earth was accomplished far more easily than on the previous occasion, inasmuch as it was comparatively soft from that recent disturbance of its solid mass: and in about an hour's time the livid corpse of Grumley was exposed to view.

Mrs. Brace threw a shuddering glance into the grave—then turned away sick at heart and sick at soul;—sick at heart with a sense of loathsome disgust—sick at soul through reviving horror at the tremendous turpitude of which she had been guilty!

And now the corpse of Mobbs was tossed into the hole;—and Frederick Dray shovelled back the soil with a vigorous arm. In another hour that portion of the task was accomplished: the superfluous earth was then disposed of as on the previous occasion—the stone was restored to its setting in a like manner—and all was accomplished!

And now the murderer and the murderess looked each other in the face for almost the first time during upwards of two hours; and while Dray fixed his looks with gloating sensuousness upon the milliner, the latter gazed upon him with a wild and vacant curiosity as if to satisfy herself that all which had just passed was otherwise than a dream and that his presence *there* was a proof of the deed in which he had played so important a part.

Then, as he slowly led her away from the kitchen, that man of indomitable hardihood whispered in her ears his intention to pass the remainder of the night in her company: and, although at the first intimation of this desire on his part, she recoiled from him as if his touch were that of a serpent,—as if, indeed, *he* was *alone* the murderer, and *she* was pure and immaculate,—yet at the next moment she was seized with a sudden joy at the idea of not being doomed to pass the rest of that awful night in a deep, deep solitude!

She therefore consented;—and Frederick Dray accompanied Mrs. Brace to her own chamber.

CHAPTER CLIV.

THE MURDERER AND THE MURDERESS.

Two hours had elapsed;—and the footman lay sleeping by the side of his mistress.

Yes—soundly and undisturbedly he slept,—starting not with troubled dreams—nor giving utterance to a moan expressive of remorse nor of a cry indicative of terror. It seemed as if no memory of his crime haunted or appalled him,—as if no voice of blood whispered its vindictive warning in his ear—as if no pang shot through his heart. Calmly and deeply he slept,—no perspiration exuding in horror from his brow—no clenching of the hands—no feverish pulsation of the heart.

But that woman who had been the accomplice in his crime and who was now his paramour,—did she also sleep? Great God! what would she not have given to be enabled to sleep as that man by her side was then sleeping?

Sleep for her? No—not yet—not yet!

Tossing and turning in her place,—with lightning running in her veins and the scorching heat of fever over the entire surface of her skin,—now closing her eyes for a few minutes in the vain hope of wooing slumber—then opening them again and fixing them for the hundredth time upon the lamp which still burnt upon the toilette table,—then again essaying to compose herself to sleep, and again opening her eyes to assure herself that the light had not gone out,—now reasoning against the tremendous terrors which haunted her—now yielding to all their excruciating anguish,—at one moment persuading herself that it was impossible there could be such things as ghosts, and at another flinging her startled looks

around the room in dread of meeting the glazed and stony eyes of some spectre from the tomb,—now experiencing the weight of a stupendous consternation on account of the dead, dead silence which prevailed throughout the house—now springing up in the couch with a hideous terror as some unknown sound fell upon her ears,—at one time looking her position coolly in the face and weighing all the chances of future detection and permanent security—at another shuddering as alarms accumulated upon her guilty soul and made her contemplate the scaffold looming in the horizon,—such were the alternations of doubt, fancied safety, reviving dread, horror, hope, and despair, through which that woman passed!

Now the galling of her conscience became poignantly intolerable—now her heart sickened at the dread of detection and disgrace, and her very life seemed shrinking from her bosom. Her memory seemed to curse her with its appalling recollections—to blast her with the lightning vividness of its thoughts—to crush her with the weight of all that filled its cells even to bursting, as the veins and vessels may become gorged with blood. Never were her ideas so harrowing—so fraught with excruciating torture. Now through her soul there seemed to gush the piercing, rending, lancinating torrent of all the aggregate calamities known to mortal experience: scaring, mysterious, and horrible sensations were upon her.

Vainly did she writhe in her couch:—vainly did she toss and turn, as if to free herself from some tremendous load—some monstrous oppression which sate upon her like a night-mare. Upon soul and body that awful sensation was paramount—dominating all feeling, all sense, all power, all energy. Then, in another moment, her brain would become a whirlwind—her ideas chaos—her thoughts confusion. Distraction would claim her in due turn as its prey;—and thus she went on, despairing, hoping, fearing, maddening, rapid as such thoughts only can be!

'Twas a wondrous, a terrible, and a mysterious phantasmagoria that was passing through the mind of the murderess. And, O God! how scorching, withering, blasting were the lightnings of many of those images which thus shot athwart her brain!

Yes—the punishment of the murderess begins upon earth!

Now the miserable, miserable woman raised herself upon her elbow and contemplated the features of the man who slumbered by her side. Oh! how she envied him that calm, undisturbed, and apparently dreamless slumber in which he was entranced! At that moment she would have given all she was worth,—her costly furniture, her splendid jewels, her massive plate, her elegant wardrobe, her money in the funds—aye, all her riches—all—all,—for only one sip of that Lethean cup in which the accomplice of her guilt had thus steeped his own senses. Long did she gaze upon him—upon that man whose iron soul seemed proof against the stings of conscience and whose memory was a tranquil lake disturbed not by the corpse which its deep waters entombed!

And then into her mind stole the recollection that she had resolved to murder the man who was sleeping by her side and whom she had been compelled to receive to her arms,—the man who had evinced so heartless an indifference and so brutal a callousness in demanding and exacting the pleasures of love within so short a time after the perpetration of a diabolical murder! And she conceived a horrible hatred—an intense loathing for that man whom crime had made her equal, her companion, and her bedfellow—aye, and who had already asserted the domination of a master. But though Mrs. Brace thus entertained such hostile feelings and so profound a repugnance with regard to him, she dared no longer harbour the idea of making *him* also a victim! No—she felt that there was enough of turpitude weighing upon her soul,—more—far more than she could contemplate with coolness—and too much for any one mortal to have to answer for!

Placing her head upon the pillow once more, she again—for the hundredth time—endeavoured to settle herself to sleep. But terrible visions continued to haunt her. Fruitlessly did she essay to turn her thoughts into other channels,—to retrospect over the past—to feast her imagination upon the pleasures of earlier days: whichever way her mental eyes were turned, they were sure to behold a corpse at the end of the vista into which they plunged their looks.

At length she beheld a sickly and solitary gleam of dawn stealing between the curtains;—and she felt that unless she closed her eyes in slumber for at least a short half-hour, she should be totally unfitted for the occupations and duties of the coming day. Rendered a coward by her guilty conscience, she was now terrified by the thought that strange suspicions would be excited by the harassed, haggard, and care-worn aspect which she must inevitably wear if unrefreshed by sleep; and she wrestled against wakefulness with all her power. But still she slept not—still did slumber avoid her pillow!

Gradually did the day advance, making a sort of "darkness visible" in the chamber—then affording that indistinct and twilight view of things which allows the fevered imagination such dread scope for torturing the most ordinary objects into the most hideous phantom shapes,—while the lamp condensed its pale rays into a small red globe of flame.

And it was now that an incipient heaviness began to weigh down the eyes of the milliner and that a vague, dreamy, but not altogether tranquil repose was stealing over her,—when she fancied that there was a stir of life somewhere in the room! All in an instant did she waken up again—waken as completely up as before,—while her looks were thrown in terror around the chamber. She listened—with suspended breath and upheaved bosom she listened: and again she fancied that there was a sound like the rustling of the curtains!

A cold perspiration started out from every pore: she was bathed all in a moment in her own agony. Her breath came short and gaspingly—a nervous sensation seized upon her limbs—an awful consternation struck upon her brain.

And now that rustling, at first so gentle and scarcely perceptible, was renewed: and the horrible conviction was carried to her heart, with the piercing and chilling effect of an ice-shaft, that it was *not* the mere work of fancy!

Some *one*, or some *thing*, was moving in the chamber! She held her breath again—she listened in the hope of being relieved from her terrors by finding that it was her companion exhibiting some restlessness: but no—*he* slept on calmly and undisturbedly.

Nerving herself with all the courage she possessed—or rather, acting upon the impulse of that desperation to which the wretched woman was goaded—

she raised herself in the couch—paused to listen once more—and then, as the sounds still continued, she sent forward one fearful glance towards the window whence the strange rustling came.

But suddenly all became still—leaving the miserable Mrs. Brace unrelieved of her terrors, or rather a prey to a suspense fraught with an equal agony,—so appalling was the weight that sate upon her soul—so painful was the sickness that hung about her heart!

Suddenly her doubts were dissipated and her worst fears were confirmed: for the curtains were parted, as if by some object passing between them—and yet she saw nothing! Her hair rose crisp upon her head—and such a tightness seized upon her heart that she felt as if the moment of annihilation were at hand!

Appalled by the fearfulness of the thoughts that swept with whirlwind speed across her brain, she was unable to cry out: petrified and actionless by the stupor of a tremendous consternation, her form was rigid as that of a statue while her soul was tortured with the agonies of hell.

Then, as a still more terrific creeping stole along her nerves,—and as she fell back on her pillow with eyes fixed and limbs rigid, as in a fearful waking trance,—she became conscious, beyond all possibility of doubt, that light and rapid footsteps were crossing the floor of the chamber!

She endeavoured to give vent to her terror in a loud cry: but her lips remained sealed—a mist fell upon her senses—and consciousness abandoned her.

Almost at that very instant Frederick Dray awoke with a start: for a hideous dream had suddenly swept through his imagination.

The dawn had by this time advanced so far as to render all objects in the room tolerably clear;—and throwing his looks upon Mrs. Brace, she man was instantly shocked by the impression that ahe was dead. But placing his hand upon her breast, he felt her heart palpitating feebly within, while her body still retained sufficient warmth to dispel the awful idea which had first struck him.

But at the same moment he was startled by a strange sound which reached his ear;—and for an instant he felt a cold terror strike to his heart. He was not however the man to yield himself up to superstitious alarms;—and, almost immediately recovering his self-possession, he listened with a breathless attention. The singular noise was continued; and it sounded like a low scratching against the door, accompanied by a subdued whining lament.

The truth flashed in a moment to the brain of the murderer;—and, tearing aside the curtain, he received the confirmation of his thought;—for *there* —scraping, pawing, and whining at the door—was the mongrel dog of the murdered Mobbs!

Without pausing to devote any attention to Mrs. Brace, Frederick Dray sprang from the bed and rushed towards the dog. But the beast, having an instinctive apprehension of his design, flew under the bed. The footman lifted the drapery and beheld the eyes of the animal shining with a lurid glare in the obscurity. Unhesitatingly creeping beneath the couch, he crawled on his hands and knees towards the mongrel, which now began to growl with a subdued ferocity. Still undaunted, the footman made his way nearer and nearer to the brute, with one hand now ready to grasp its throat should it attempt to fly at him. But the beast kept backing before him, until it passed from under the bed, and thus retrogressively worked its way into a corner. Then, with a courage worthy of a nobler cause, the footman fastened his iron grasp upon the dog's neck, and with both hands he held the brute as if it were in a vice.

The dog struggled desperately—but could not utter the slightest sound. The footman's fingers pressed deep into its throat—its tongue was lolling out—and it was already writhing in mortal agony,—when the door of the chamber suddenly opened—and Harriet the lady's-maid entered the room!

Startled by this abrupt incident, Frederick Dray relaxed his hold upon the dog;—and before he could recover it, the maddened brute fastened its teeth upon his naked arm, lacerating the flesh severely. A terrible string of oaths fell from the footman's lips: but the dog swept past him—rushed to the door which Harriet still held open in her hand—and sprang down the stairs. A servant was at that moment sweeping out the shop, the front door of which stood open;—and thus the mongrel Toby, meeting with no farther impediment, succeeded in effecting its escape from the clutches of Frederick Dray.

It would be difficult to describe the mingled astonishment, grief, and rage, which sprang into existence in Harriet's bosom, when she thus burst upon a scene which afforded her unmistakable proof that her lover—or rather the man whom she looked upon as her lover—had passed the night with Mrs. Brace. For a few moments she remained stupified, holding the door wide open: but when the dog shot so wildly past her, a scream of terror burst from her lips;—and the sound of anguish recalled Mrs. Brace to consciousness.

Then began a war of bitter reproaches poured forth on one side and earnest entreaties on the other,—Harriet upbraiding her mistress in terms that were strong without coarseness or vulgarity—and the milliner exerting all her powers of persuasion to pacify the angry and outraged abigail,—while Frederick Dray was busily employed in winding a piece of linen round his injured arm.

Ultimately the footman was compelled to interfere, for the purpose of putting an end to a scene which threatened to alarm the house;—and, partly by coaxing, and partly by menaces, he induced Harriet to promise her forgiveness for all that had occurred. This concession on the young woman's side was however accompanied with a certain sullenness and subdued discontent which showed that she had yielded to alarm rather than to the prompting of her own inclination;—and Mrs. Brace understood full well that she must in future regard her lady's-maid as a secret enemy.

CHAPTER CLV.

THE FATE OF THE WORKING-MAN'S WIFE.

For four weary days did Mrs. Melmoth wander about the metropolis in search of her husband,—straining her sickly babe to her withered breast, and dragging after her the three wearied, starving children whose feet left the traces of blood upon the pavement.

Oh! miserable, miserable types of that sorrow, destitution, and wretchedness which the wealthy and tyrannical few have made the hideous heritage of the millions for centuries and centuries past,—

how terrible was your lot! All the woes of the plundered, the enslaved, and the persecuted of this world which a detestable oligarchy has converted into a hell, seemed to have concentrated their rage in order to vent that tremendous spite and implacable vengeance upon the heads of this devoted—doomed—outcast family!

But does not the tale come home to many a heart cankered by the galling chain of serfdom?—does not the picture strike with the force of a sledge-hammer upon the comprehension of those whose inheritance is poverty?

And if such be the effect produced, to no graphic merit on our part is the result ascribable—to no superior powers of delineation invested in us is that influence to be attributed. No: but the tale comes home thus to the heart of many, and the picture strikes thus upon the understanding of myriads, because TRUTH is at the foundation—and the public streets and gorgeous squares of mighty cities as well as the bye-lanes, and hedges, and ditches of the verdant provinces, present to the eyes those wandering, famishing, squalid specimens of society's outcasts, in numbers and aspect that would be disgraceful even to a barbarian State.

O Almighty God! how long must these things last?—how long are the millions to remain the slaves of the few?—how long wilt thou suffer the fruits of the earth to be monopolised by a tyrant oligarchy? Do thy thunders sleep, thou Creator of all?—or hast thou abandoned the world to chance and its proceedings to the wild will of those who rule by violence, by oppressive laws, by cruelty, and by blood?

For four days did the wife of the working man drag her weary limbs through the streets, and squares, and alleys of this vast metropolis—seeking her husband,—and vainly seeking! For four days did her children train at her heels, enduring the poignant anguish of famine, the brutality of constables, the insults of pampered flunkeys, and the frowns of the rich and great.

Stately equipages swept past, splashing them with mud—and no compassionate look was thrown upon that wretched family—no pence proffered from the hand of wealth and beauty. If they sank down, fainting and exhausted, upon the door step of a West End palace, a hall-porter, flaming with scarlet and yellow and bedizened with gold-lace, would drive them away as if they had just emerged from a lazar-house and their breath was fraught with pestilence. If they wandered forth into the suburbs with the hope of meeting a husband and a father there, a sign-board with a painted notice to the effect that "all vagrants found loitering about near those premises would be prosecuted according to law," scared them away. If they entered a churchyard and sate down to rest in the porch of the house of God, a burly beadle or a stern overseer would drive them roughly off. If they sought to enter the parks—*the people's parks*—those parks which belong to the nation, and consequently to all the individuals constituting this nation,—if they hoped to pass the gates of these enclosures, there was a harsh voice raised to warn them off and perhaps a cane wherewith to drive away the children? And wherefore?—because they were in rags—and your aristocratic folks, who frequent those parks, lolling listlessly in their splendid carriages, cannot bear the sight of rags!

No: away with the tatterdemallion from the same atmosphere which is breathed by Royalty and Aristocracy!—away with him or her to the House of Correction! What right have your starving, dying wretches to obtrude their squalid and half-naked forms upon the view of the gentle creatures who are clad in furs, and ermine, and silk, and velvet?

For four days, once again do we repeat, did the miserable mother and her children wander about in search of a husband and a father. And their search was vain. They did not forget to call at their old lodging—that sorry abode whence they had been so cruelly ejected;—and they inquired whether Melmoth had visited the place. The landlady responded in a sharp affirmative; and in the same breath she demanded whether Mrs. Melmoth had come to pay her the arrears of rent due. But the poor woman, heedless of the question, besought the landlady to give her the particulars of her husband's visit; and all she could learn was that he had called five or six days previously and was struck with consternation when he found that his family had left the house. Mrs. Melmoth likewise learnt that he had wept bitterly; and that he had rushed away in a sort of mingled frenzy and desperation, leaving no message behind him.

From time to time, during those four days of weary wanderings, Mrs. Melmoth heard vague but terrible rumours connected with the same appalling tale which had reached her ears in the low lodging-house,—how the graves of the dead had been violated and the corpses exhumed for the frightful but mysterious and incomprehensible purpose of mutilation. And these hideous narratives filled her with a horror that made the blood curdle in her veins and the pulsations of her heart stand still.

It was on the fifth morning of those fruitless wanderings that the unhappy family was traversing a fashionable street at the West End of London, when Mrs. Melmoth was suddenly seized with so severe an illness that she sank down upon the steps leading to the front door of a lordly mansion. A mortal terror came over the poor creature—a terror accompanying the sensation of approaching death: for the reflection — the harrowing reflection flashed to her mind—"What was to become of that poor sickly babe and the other children, if she were to be called away from them?"

Oh! the dire anguish—the ineffable misery—the acutely rending grief, which a parent experiences when her soul's secret voice within asks this tremendous question!

And that anguish—that misery—that grief were now felt by Mrs. Melmoth, as she sank down on the door-step. The three eldest children were clinging around her in a moment,—when the door suddenly opened and a stout domestic, apparelled in a gorgeous livery, commanded them all to rise and depart, or he should be forced to send for the constable!

But the poor children were heedless of his voice: for they were absorbed in the dread spectacle presented by their mother, who now fell back on the steps. The eldest boy took the babe from her arms and gave it to his sister to hold: then, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he bent over his dying parent, exclaiming in a voice of intensest anguish, "Oh! look up, dear mother—look up, I beseech you! Say but one word—tell me that you are not very, *very* ill—that you will soon be better——Oh! do tell me *that!*"

But the poor creature was unable to speak;—and as she raised herself up with immense difficulty and

fixed her glazing eyes upon her children, an expression of indescribable anguish passed over her countenance. For in that supreme moment of her mortal existence—while the spirit hovered between two worlds, and the last breath fluttered upon her ashy lips, and life was about to flit away for ever—she seemed to feel with the most poignant anguish the dread condition in which her friendless, almost orphan offspring would be left behind her.

And, O God! who can describe the look—the last look, which she fixed upon her children?—a look so full of mingled fondness and despair—so fraught with deepest, holiest love, combined with an awful agony of doubt and fear, that no language could convey all its meaning nor delineate its intensity.

And around her were those weeping children, the eldest of whom alone understood that his mother was *dying*, and the others weeping so bitterly because they thought that she was ill and because they beheld their brother weep likewise.

And still upon the threshold of the door stood the pompous servant, commanding them to depart—menacing them with the constable—and bidding them observe that *he* was too shrewd to be taken in by what he denominated "the sham illness" of the woman.

Some persons were soon attracted to the spot; and it was then discovered that the poor creature was really dying. Alarmed at this announcement—not because he pitied that perishing mother surrounded by her offspring, but because he was frightened lest the corpse should be brought into the house, and he had a horror of the dead—especially a dead pauper,—the stout footman banged the door violently and hastened down to the servants' hall to relate to the other domestics all that was occurring.

And *there*—upon the cold stone steps—at the rich lord's door—the homeless, famished, vagrant wife of the English working-man gave up the ghost;—and while her children were borne away to the workhouse by the beadle of the parish, the lifeless mother was laid out upon a stretcher and carried to the dead-ward of the same establishment, to be interred so soon as the contracting undertaker had time to knock up together the few thin deal boards constituting the pauper's coffin!

CHAPTER CLVI.

THE PRINCESS AND HER LOVER.

RETURN we now to that secluded dwelling in the environs of Windsor, where Sir Richard Stamford had fixed his abode.

It was evening: the curtains in the parlour were drawn—the fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—the lamp shone upon the table—and the atmosphere was warm, and likewise perfumed with the odour of some early flowers reared in a hot-house. These were doubtless the present of some lady of rank and wealth;—and indeed the fair donor was now seated upon the sofa by the side of the baronet.

Is it necessary to inform our readers that Sir Richard's companion was the Princess Amelia?

Yes—in a comparatively humble attire, the royal lady was gracing that room with her divine presence. But let us not be mistaken: we do not speak fulsomely of her as the daughter of a King—for our's is the last pen on the face of the earth that would record anything adulatory of rank for mere rank's sake alone. No: it was not because she was a Princess that we depict her as embellishing that chamber: but it is as a woman—a charming, amiable, and generous-hearted woman that we now regard her.

And as she sate by the side of Sir Richard Stamford, with one fair hand locked in his own, she gazed upon him with looks full of tenderness—full of love—full of profound and impassioned affection;—and the heightening colour of her damask cheeks and the deepening scarlet of her plump and juicy mouth, combined with the gentle heaving of her bosom, indicated the soft desires that were animating her soul. For that was the age of low gowns and transparent dresses; and more than half of the royal lady's voluptuous breast was revealed to view, when her scarf was laid aside. Thus the swelling and falling of those luxuriant globes of snow were plainly visible;—and as the baronet felt the warm pressure of Amelia's hand and beheld her glowing bust,—when, too, he saw the tint of the rose deepening into that of the carnation upon her cheeks, and her fine blue eyes becoming more melting and tender in expression,—he would have been something more or something less than man had he not caught the effluence of that desire and the spirit of that sensual longing which exhaled as it were from the beauteous person of the royal maiden.

With rapture—oh! with ineffable rapture, did he gaze upon this young, lovely, and confiding creature who had given him her heart and was now prepared to give him her virtue;—and as his eyes wandered slowly over her heavenly countenance and her form so rich in all its virginal contours, he could scarcely believe that this radiant being, so full of vigorous youthfulness and with such a grand destiny in the perspective if she chose to pursue it,—he could scarcely settle his mind, we say, to believe that she was really his—and his only!

And truly, truly, the Princess Amelia was a charming creature. Arrayed in the simple vesture which she had purposely assumed to escape observation when visiting her lover, she possessed an air of amiability which could not fail to win the heart independently of the power exercised by her personal loveliness. And this loveliness was of no common order: indeed, it has been already described in an earlier chapter;—but never, perhaps, did it appear to greater effect than on the present occasion. For the royal maiden wore a dark dress which set off her light shining hair and her alabaster skin to the utmost advantage. Her beauteous hand and delicate wrist, with their tracery of blue veins, were thrown into admirable relief by the dark sleeves that covered the robust yet well-modelled arm;—and above the low and sloping corsage of her dress the well-rounded bosoms rose in all their luxuriant grandeur and their stainless purity. The dazzling fairness of her skin was such that it shone through the black silk hose of delicate texture which marked the shape of the well-turned ankle;—and the riband turning round it served to display its elegance of proportion all the more advantageously.

There was an air of ardent languor in her whole appearance;—and her person—her looks—her smile, all breathed a refined voluptuousness which was well calculated to ravish the heart and pour floods of ecstacy into the soul of her lover. Around

this charming creature did a perfume of love seem to float, intoxicating the senses of him who was thus basking in the warm and mellowed sunshine of her looks and smiles; and with the soft enthusiasm of holy love that he felt for her in one sense, was mingled the more earthly longing transfused from her own glowing temperament.

"Beloved Amelia," he said, in a soft low tone, "you have asked me if I am happy now—and I can truthfully reply that my felicity is complete. Ten days have now elapsed since you permitted me to declare that I love you: and on that occasion—Oh! how memorable was the hour!—you confessed to a kindred feeling. And during those ten days, not one has elapsed without bringing you hither to irradiate the gloom of my solitude. Ought I not therefore to be happy?—ought I not to forget the past, and think only of the present and the future?"

"Yes—ten days have elapsed, Richard," murmured the Princess, burying her blushing countenance upon her lover's breast as she spoke,—"since I threw myself into your arms and declared that I was henceforth your wife—and that you must consider yourself my husband. Yes—upon that occasion I vowed to love you as the being most dear to me in the whole world—dearer than parents, brothers, and sisters—dearer than all that wealth and rank can bestow."

"And you have not repented of this promise, my Amelia?" said the baronet, passing his arm gently round her waist.

"No—Oh! no—I never shall repent!" she murmured, her whole form vibrating to his fond pressure: and throwing her head back in a soft sensuous langour, she regarded the ceiling as if in deep communing with herself.

And as that charming head was supported by the back of the sofa, the attitude which her person thus took was one of such complete abandonment that

her lover had never known her to yield to before,—an abandonment which profiled all the undulating lines of her full but symmetrical form. There was something irresistibly inviting—something overpoweringly ravishing in this attitude;—and as the eyes of the baronet swept over the beauteous features which were thus outlined and the flowing developments of her person which were thus thrown forth, he felt that he could die on behalf of one in whom so many graces and such marvellous attractions were concentrated.

"Yes," she resumed, her eyes half closing, and her bosom heaving with a profound sigh of pleasure,—"I am thine, Richard—unalterably thine! But still meseems that you cannot altogether forget that difference in our social stations which the accident of birth has established: still must I complain that all the advances of love's tenderness have to emanate from *me*. Oh! why will you not treat me as an equal?—why will you not look upon me as your wife in reality as much as by virtue of the promise which I have made? Yet do I thank you—Oh! sincerely thank you, Richard, for all the delicacy of your conduct towards me: but at the same time I am anxious that you should forget me *as a Princess*, and know me—love me—treat me only *as a wife!*"

"Dearest, dearest Amelia," exclaimed the baronet, his whole form trembling with an unknown and ineffable joy, as he pressed her more closely to his heart and felt her glowing bosom palpitate profoundly beneath his hand as his arm encircled her waist,—"what would you have me understand?"

"That I am thine—thine altogether, my well beloved!" she answered, in a tone of exultation and impassioned fervour: and throwing herself completely into his arms, she whispered in the broken and faltering voice that indicated emotions deeply stirred and desires profoundly excited, "Think me not the less worthy of all thy love because no priest's blessing may be bestowed upon our union: but remember that thou may'st wed me in the sight of heaven, if not in that of the world—and that the bond which thus unites us becomes as indissoluble as if it were rivetted by all the holiest ceremonies of the church."

"And dost thou not tremble for the consequences, my well-beloved Amelia?" asked the baronet, in a low and tremulous voice, as he strained to his breast that luxuriant but symmetrical form which was endowed with all the supple and elastic grace of an amorous bayadere when smothering her lover with devouring caresses.

"Those who love fondly—wildly—madly—passionately," murmured the Princess, "pause not to ponder upon consequences! The present absorbs their souls: the past is forgotten—the future is unheeded, and therefore undreaded! Such is my case, Richard: for I love thee fondly—wildly—madly—passionately!"

And as the royal lady thus spoke, she raised her head from his shoulder where it had reposed;—and, gazing upon him with her blushing, burning countenance, she looked into the depths of his eyes with an ardour that transfused its flames into his own soul.

"Dearest, dearest Amelia!" he murmured: "what a glorious view of heaven has this love of thine opened to my comprehension!"

And then they gazed upon each other for a long time in silence: but love, even when it is mute, speaks with a thousand eloquent tongues—and the soul has an ear which catches all the delicious outpourings of those secret and mysterious voices. Oh! these are moments of ineffable bliss and surpassing ecstasy,—when the very life appears to be melting in mingled joy and voluptuous languor—and when the impassioned looks that thus meet and thus convey vows more fervid than language could frame, unite in bliss and lose themselves for a long time in each other!

Yes—love has its intoxicating pleasures and its delirium of happiness; and the Princess Amelia now experienced all the glowing rapture and the elysian joyousness which fill the youthful heart when it feels another beating aganist its own. And carried away by the ardent longings which were devouring her, she pressed her lips to those of her lover; while he felt her entire form vibrating in his arms and her bosom palpitating like the long swell of the ocean after the whirlwind has swept over it. Her eyes, half closing, still looked love, and fondness, and desire from beneath their long lashes,—inundating him as it were with ecstatic raptures and bathing him in a warm flood of heavenly bliss: transports glided from one soul into the other by the mysterious mesmerism of that delicious contact of their forms and those transfusing looks of mingled tenderness and fervid passion;—all their thoughts and all their senses were absorbed in the enjoyment of the blissful *present*,—the *past* was indeed forgotten, the *future* as utterly disregarded;—and the royal lady abandoned her virtue to her lover as unresistingly and as confidingly as she had already bestowed her heart!

CHAPTER CLVII.

FLORIMEL AND THE PAGE.

THREE days had elapsed since the removal of Pauline Clarendon and her sister to their old residence in the Edgeware Road; and in the meantime Lord Florimel had received the letter which the young maiden had written to him, and to which allusion was made in a recent chapter.

It was evening: and the nobleman was seated in one of the parlours of his splendid mansion in Piccadilly—pondering in a deeply mournful reverie upon the sudden and to him unaccountable estrangement of Pauline's affections. For being totally ignorant of all the adventures which had occurred at the masquerade,—little suspecting that Lord Montgomery had personated him upon that occasion, or that Pauline had been made the dupe of the circumstances attendant on such a proceeding on the Earl's part,—the unhappy Florimel knew not into what channel to turn his conjectures in order to seek out a reason and a motive for the conduct of the beauteous being whom he loved so tenderly.

For the hundredth time since he had received the mysterious letter, did he now take it from his pocket-book and re-peruse the contents, which ran as follow:—

"Everything is at an end beween us. I need not inflict upon myself the torture of expatiating on the motives which prompt this decision: your own good sense cannot fail to give you the assurance that I have no alternative but the adoption of this resolution. And the decision to which I have come, is unalterable. I have withdrawn myself from the world, and shall henceforth

devote all my care, all my thoughts, and all my attentions to my afflicted sister. It will be useless for you to attempt to discover my abode: but even if some accident should possibly make you acquainted with it, it were still more useless for you to ask an interview. In a word, I command your lordship to abstain from molesting me in any way: I entreat you to think of me no more. Dead to the world—dead to you—dead to the heart's best and purest affections, I exist only as a ministering friend and companion for my poor sister. Farewell, then, for ever!

"PAULINE."

The reader can fully comprehend how well calculated this note was to plunge the unhappy Florimel into the deepest perplexity and the profoundest sorrow. He remembered the former misunderstanding which was produced by the letter sent him by Mrs. Brace through the agency of Rose Foster; and he doubted not that some new error had arisen to inspire Pauline with a jealous animosity towards him. But he could not for the life of him settle his ideas upon any recent phase in his conduct which could have possibly become liable to any misconception. He had in reality proved fully faithful to all the pledges made by him to Pauline; and the reader has seen how firmly and prudently—how resolutely and cheerfully he resisted the overtures made to him by the unknown lady who sent the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. In a word, he had not been guilty of a single weakness wherewith he might reproach himself since he had given Pauline such solemn pledges of fidelity and reformation: nor was he able to call to mind any incident which could possibly be misconstrued or lay him open to suspicion. His bewilderment was therefore equal to his sorrow.

Upon receiving the letter in the first instance, he had set off post haste to the Duke of Devonshire's villa near Aylesbury, with the feeble hope of obtaining some clue to Pauline's new residence. But in this endeavour he utterly failed: the servants at that establishment declined or were unable to answer his queries. In a state of mind bordering upon distraction he had returned to London; and, proceeding without a moment's delay to Devonshire House, he obtained an interview with the Duchess. Her Grace affected complete ignorance of Pauline's abode; and although she was melted even to tears by the mingled passion and pathos with which her noble young cousin proclaimed his innocence of any action calculated to wound the feelings or the dignity of Pauline, she nevertheless was not convinced by his pleading. On the contrary, she judged him entirely by his antecedents; and thus, while she pitied him deeply, she looked upon his present sorrow merely in the light of contrition and not as a sentiment so closely allied with innocence as it really was. Moreover, as he made not the slightest allusion to the masquerade, she herself did not touch upon it;—and even when he implored her to explain to him the motives of Pauline's conduct, if she herself happened to be acquainted with them, she evaded the subject as well as she was able, under the impression that he was hypocritically affecting ignorance on that head, because, if charged with being at the masquerade, he was prepared to deny the accusation. Thus, believing her cousin to be acting with duplicity in one sense though inspired with a sincere contrition in another,—but well aware that Pauline would not be prepared, at least in her present state of feeling, to accept the latter as an expiation for the former, — the Duchess avoided any explanatory comment and preferred playing the part of a listener. She likewise thought that some degree of punishment would aid in the effectual reformation of her cousin; and though she herself was far from being imbued with really virtuous principles, yet as a woman she could enter sympathetically into the feelings of her friend Pauline under the outrage which she firmly believed the maiden to have sustained at Florimel's hands.

Thus was it that the young nobleman retired from Devonshire House as much in the dark as ever, not only with regard to Pauline's new place of abode, but likewise in respect to the motives which had instigated her conduct towards him.

During the three days which had elapsed since he received the letter, Florimel had wandered on horseback amidst all the outskirts of the metropolis,—gazing intently up at the windows of all such neat little dwellings as he fancied to be of the kind which Pauline was likely to select for her seclusion: but it never once occurred to him that she could possibly have gone back to that selfsame villa where he had first formed her acquaintance. His search was therefore utterly fruitless; and we now find him seated in one of the apartments of his elegant mansion, plunged into a deep despondency and losing himself in vain conjectures relative to the misunderstanding which had occured.

While he was thus absorbed in his mournful reflections, the door was opened gently; and Rao, the black page, appeared upon the threshold. But the nobleman observed him not;—and the sable youth, gliding noiselessly into the room, stopped at a short distance from his master, whom he contemplated with the most steadfast earnestness.

Florimel was gazing upon the fire with a listless vacancy; and the flames thereof as well as the lustre of the wax candles burning upon the mantel-piece lighted his countenance with that Rembrandt effect which threw out one side of his face into strong relief. The page was thus enabled to observe the expression of deep despair which the young nobleman's features wore; and an undefinable smile of mingled malignity, joy, triumph, and hatred glided over the lips of the sable boy.

At length, fearing that he should be noticed while thus contemplating his master, Rao advanced into his presence.

"Well—what has brought you hither?" demanded Florimel, somewhat sharply: for he was annoyed at being thus disturbed in the midst of his reflections.

"Your lordship has issued no orders respecting the dinner hour," replied Rao, in his soft and subdued tone; "and it is now six o'clock. Will your lordship be pleased to have dinner served up at once?"

"Not immediately, Rao," replied the nobleman, in a kinder tone. "I have not the slightest appetite. I will ring when I wish dinner to be served up."

"May I most respectfully ask if your lordship feels indisposed?" said the boy, the glitter of malignity for an instant flashing in his eyes as he put the question.

"No—yes—that is, somewhat," responded Florimel: then, raising his head and looking up into

the youth's countenance, he said, "But wherefore do you ask, Rao?"

"Because I eat your lordship's bread," was the immediate though hypocritical reply; "and it would grieve me to the soul to learn that your lordship was either ill or unhappy."

"Unhappy!" echoed Florimel: "what makes you think that I am unhappy?"

"Perhaps your lordship is already angry with me for venturing the remark which has just fallen from my lips?" said Rao, in a tone of deep mournfulness and with a humble diffidence of manner.

"No—far from it," exclaimed Florimel, who was in one of those humours when sympathy is welcomed as a solace, come from whatever quarter it may. "I am desirous to deserve and retain the good feeling of all my dependants. Speak, then, freely—and tell me wherefore you fancy that I am unhappy."

"Because your lordship's altered manner and changed appearance tell the mournful tale," said Rao, throwing into his looks and voice an expression of profound melancholy;—"and also because I myself am too much accustomed to gaze upon the countenance of the unhappy, not to know when the shade which sits upon the heart darkens the features likewise."

"Ah! is it possible that you are acquainted with sorrow—you, who are so young?" exclaimed Florimel, forgetting his own griefs for the moment in the interest excited by the observation of the youthful page.

"I am acquainted with sorrow, my lord," was the reply, "because I have been tortured to the soul in witnessing its ravages upon the heart of one who is near and dear to me. Personally I am uninjured by the blow which has stricken *her:* but sympathetically, I am afflicted—profoundly afflicted."

"Ah! then it was some one whom you loved?" cried Florimel. "And yet you are a mere boy——"

"It was my sister," said Rao, in a low deep tone.

"Your sister!" repeated Florimel. "Then you have a sister still living? Methought, from what you told me when first I received you into my service, that you were without relatives or friends in the whole wide world?"

"I informed your lordship that I was an orphan and friendless," replied the boy, a tear—a gilded tear, wherein was reflected the light of a perturbed spirit, trickling down his cheek: but instantaneously dashing it away, he said, "Yes—I am an orphan, and I *was* friendless until you received me into your service. Had I not been deprived of my parents, that tremendous misfortune would never have occurred," he added, his manner indicating that he was now pre-occupied with an unquiet thought.

"To what misfortune do you allude?" asked Florimel, in a kind tone, at the same instant casting upon him a look of sympathy and encouragement as one extends a hand to a suffering friend.

"Oh! to what misfortune do I allude?" echoed Rao, with a singular expression of the countenance and a strange accent of the voice; while over his lips there swept a smile which might either have been taken as indicative of the bitterness of newly awakened grief or for the malignity of sarcasm: then, having uttered those words in obedience to the sudden impulse which prompted him, he seemed to return to himself—and said, "I was speaking of the misfortune which overtook my poor sister."

"And that misfortune?" exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively.

"I should rather have described it as the foul wrong that was done her, my lord," Rao hastened to observe.

"Where is your sister now?" inquired the nobleman.

"In the far-off land of our birth, my lord," was the response.

"And is she well provided for?—is she above want?" demanded Florimel, hastily: for the generous feelings of his heart were now deeply touched.

"She is fortunate in those respects, my lord," answered Rao: "but her heart is a wreck—one sentiment alone inspiring it now."

"And that sentiment?" said Gabriel.

"Is vengeance!" replied the sable boy, with a singular vehemence of tone and manner, almost amounting to a significancy.

"Then her wrongs are deep?" observed Florimel, his interest gradually becoming enchained in this conversation.

"Her wrongs are the foulest and the most fiend-like which a man can possibly heap upon the devoted head of a woman," returned the boy, his voice expressing a profound concentration of bitter feelings. "She loved one who deceived her—who led her to believe that she should become his wife, notwithstanding the disparity of their social rank—and who took an infernal advantage of the implicit faith and the blind confidence which that artless, unsuspecting girl placed in his honour and his love. Oh! there are seductions, my lord, the iniquity of which is deepened by circumstances to the blackest dye: and this was one of them!"

"I understand you, Rao," said the nobleman, a visible trouble coming over him as his own recollections reminded him that he was not altogether exempt from the liability to be similarly accused. "But proceed: you interest me. Who was this seducer of your sister?"

"An Englishman, my lord—a native of your own land," replied the sable youth. "Gloriously handsome was he, as sublimely beautiful was my sister; but while *her* heart was full of tenderness and truth, *his* was fraught only with deceit and perfidy. He abandoned her—shamefully abandoned her, when he learned that she was in a way to become a mother;—and their child was born in secrecy and in sin."

"And did the child survive?" asked Florimel, his tone made tremulous by the tide of recollections that was still flowing in unto his own soul.

"The child perished at its birth," continued Rao: "but the memory of my sister's shame and wrongs perished not with it. No—this memory survives; and it is immortal! I swore to avenge the injury wrought against my sister; and for this purpose I bade my native land farewell—perhaps for ever!"

"Then you are aware that your sister's seducer is in England?" said Florimel, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes—and I know also that he is in London," answered the sable youth. "I have seen him!"

"Beware, my young friend, how you seek to vent your anger upon him, whoever he may be," said the nobleman. "Remember that there are laws to punish any injury or outrage done by one towards another; and that your sister's wrongs will be

deemed but a small extenuation for any deed of vindictiveness or sudden passion into which you may be hurried."

"I have well weighed all this, my lord," said Rao, in a mild but firm tone.

"And you have taken, I hope, a prudent view of the matter," continued Florimel. "For I feel interested in you—and I should be sorry to see you come to harm. But I suppose I may not ask you the name of your sister's seducer?"

"My lord, that is a secret which I dare not reveal," was the earnest but respectful reply.

"No—I will not seek to penetrate farther into your confidence than you may choose to admit me," exclaimed the nobleman. "At the same time, circumstances not only permit, but likewise enjoin me to proffer you my counsel in this matter. In the first place I feel well-disposed towards you; and therefore I have some claim upon your attention. Secondly, I am your master; and therefore you are bound to give me your ear willingly. Thirdly, you are a stranger in these realms; and hence it becomes my duty to warn you away from the path of danger. Remember, likewise, that when you first presented yourself to me and implored me to take you into my service to save you from the misery and destitution which threatened you in a land where you found yourself a friendless foreigner,—remember, I say, that I took compassion upon you and at once received you into my household. You gave me no references—showed me no testimonials: but I took your word for all you told me. This I did cheerfully—willingly—readily: because I felt persuaded that you were not deceiving me. But if you knew the English character well, you would learn to appreciate all the more deeply this action on my part: for you might have knocked at a thousand doors without receiving so much as a word of kindness, much less an asylum within! I do not remind you of all this to glorify myself; but simply to appeal to your sense of gratitude and induce you to follow the advice which good feeling and duty alike prompt me to offer. This advice is that you will renounce all thoughts of avenging yourself upon a man who has no doubt wronged your sister grievously: for the violence of that vengeance would only redound upon your own head."

"I thank your lordship for this well-meant counsel," said Rao, averting his head and speaking in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"And you will follow it?" exclaimed Florimel.

"I will think over it, my lord," was the response, delivered with a tone and manner so suddenly altered that Florimel was uncertain whether he had really made a lasting impression upon the boy's mind, or not.

"Could not some reparation be made to your sister?" inquired the nobleman. "Perhaps, if you were to call upon the individual who has wronged her, he might concede that atonement which lies in his power and which would place her in an independent position for the remainder of her days?"

"Ah! your lordship alludes to the recompense of *money*," said Rao, in a tone of withering scorn and with an unmistakable sneer of bitterness upon his sable countenance. "Yes—I am aware that the Englishman fancies that every wrong and every injury may be expiated by means of gold: I am aware that the same panacea which the law suggests for a broken head, is believed to be a sovereign anodyne also for a breaking heart! Pardon me, my lord, if I make these observations with a bitterness which it ill becomes a dependant to display in the presence of his master: but you have deigned to inquire into my domestic secrets and my sister's wrongs, and you will not be offended if I give free vent to all the ideas which this discourse has engendered in my mind. Know, then, my lord, that my sister cherishes those lofty notions and clings to those sublime feelings which lead her to regard her lost virtue as something which no price can atone for. She would sooner perish of utter misery than receive a pecuniary recompense for the happiness, the honour, and the self-respect which have been destroyed by a villain. No, my lord—there is but one atonement which the seducer can make: and *that* he never intended to accomplish even from the first."

"Your sister must be beautiful, Rao, if she be like you," said Florimel, scarcely able to repress a smile at the thoughts which the boy's last words had conjured up and to which he was now giving expression as delicately as he could, so as not to wound the feelings of his page: "but your own good sense must make you aware that an alliance between an Englishman of rank and one of the dark-skinned houris of the east would subject not only the bridegroom, but likewise the bride, to much that is disagreeable in this country."

"Yes, my lord—I am well aware that the conventional rules of English civilization," said Rao, with continued bitterness, "revolt against what are called *unequal marriages*. But the seducer should have thought of all this when he wooed my sister and when he won her upon the faith of his solemn pledges. He should have well weighed all the obstacles which circumstances might present to their union, ere he coldly, basely, and deliberately plundered her of the only jewel which she possessed. For was it not cruel, my lord—was it not atrocious—was it not fiend-like, for that man to introduce himself into the sanctuary of a young and confiding heart, merely to make a ruin of that temple and despoil that sacred shrine? Wherefore did he fasten the talons of his infamy upon that young bosom which beat only with devotion and love for him?—wherefore did he swoop like the ravenous vulture upon that innocent lamb which had neither the inclination nor the power to injure him?—and why did he spread his toils to ensnare that harmless, timid, bashful dove which suspected not the agreeable disguise that the treacherous fowler knew so well how to assume? Oh! my lord, put yourself in my place—fancy for an instant that it was *your* sister who had thus been wronged, thus injured, thus outraged,—and tell me, my lord, how you would act?—what course would you adopt towards the vile seducer?"

While thus speaking with an impassioned vehemence, the singular and enthusiastic boy fixed upon Lord Florimel a look in which so strange an expression shone that the nobleman was troubled. A sensation of uneasiness stole over him: for there was not wanting an incident in his own life the memory of which reminded him how deservedly and how justly the bitter, inveterate, and poignant reproaches which he now heard levelled against another seducer might be addressed to himself. Then that appeal to his own feelings—his own heart,—that home-thrust question how *he* would act if *his* sister were wronged by a villain,—Oh! all this was wormwood and gall to *him;*

—and therefore was he troubled in spirit as those words fell upon his ears, and as he encountered the strange looks which the boy fixed on him.

Florimel averted his eyes—he held down his head: for conscience made him ashamed;—and then an imperceptible smile of ferocious hate and savage triumph wavered for a moment upon Rao's lips.

"What would your lordship do in the case I have named?" he inquired, after a minute's pause, during which the nobleman had remained buried in a profound reverie.

"Why do you thus put the question so pointedly to me, boy?" demanded Gabriel, raising his head again.

"Because your lordship has given me such excellent advice," was the prompt answer, "that I feel convinced your lordship is a man of stern rectitude, lofty notions, unimpeachable honour, and generous sentiments. Your lordship is incapable of the black atrocity—the hideous guilt—the loathsome treachery, which that Englishman perpetrated towards my sister. Therefore does your lordship possess a heart capable of feeling for *her* who was seduced, and for *me* who am the brother of the victim,—a heart that while it thus sympathises with us, must necessarily hold in abhorrence the wretch who consummated the diabolical infamy. Is it strange then, that thus accurately reading your lordship's feelings—your lordship's sentiments—your lordship's ideas upon the subject,—is it strange, I ask, if I should put that question to which I am now respectfully but eagerly awaiting the reply?"

As these words, fraught with goading bitterness and cutting their way like a two-edged sword into Florimel's heart, flowed with iron eloquence from the lips of the sable page, the young nobleman's trouble increased visibly. They applied, syllable for syllable, to a certain incident in his own life—an incident which Rao's narrative brought with startling vividness back to Florimel's mind; and there were even moments during the impassioned outpourings of the youth's tongue, when the nobleman fancied that the tale—the reproaches—the bitterness—the infernal hatred, were all meant to be applied to himself. But when he again looked up into the boy's countenance, and beheld the deep melancholy which his features had now reassumed,—when, too, he reflected how impossible it was that the *one* incident just referred to could possibly be known to the sable page, and that even if it were the youth could have no possible interest of a personal nature in it,—he felt assured that this was only one of those coincidences which occasionally happen in the lives of men, and which make the reproaches they hear levelled against others come bitterly home to themselves.

"You must remember, Rao," he said, evasively, "that there are certain peccadilloes which are looked very lightly upon in this country; and the seduction of a girl is not deemed a crime."

"Peccadilloes, my lord!" exclaimed the youth, in a tone of indignation. "What! is it a trivial offence—a venial error—perhaps only an amiable weakness—to plunder an innocent, devoted, and trusting female of the only jewel which she possesses? Is it no disgrace to turn the brightness of honour into the darkness of shame?—is it no sin to change virtue into vice? If honour is something to be esteemed and admired, then he who tarnishes it is assuredly a villain;—and if vice is something to be loathed, then the man who teaches a woman to enter the path of vice, is assuredly a criminal of the blackest dye himself. It may be convenient, my lord, in this land of consummate civilisation," added Rao, with withering scorn and penetrating bitterness,—"it may be convenient for the wealthy profligate and the nobly-born voluptuary to paint seduction in the mildest colours: but in the estimation of all truly honourable and really reflecting men, it must ever be ranked in the catalogue of the most heinous offences. What! to tear down a woman from the pinnacle of her purity—to poison the pure spring of her young heart's gushing affections—to render her an object of contempt and loathing in the eyes of the world—to annihilate her happiness at the same time with her innocence,—is all this no crime, my lord? Ah! I am certain—very certain that *you* would not like to have the weight of so foul a deed upon your conscience!" added the sable youth, fixing his dark eyes penetratingly upon the nobleman.

And Florimel's cheeks burned—and his lips quivered—and his whole frame trembled, as these words smote upon his brain like the scorching breath of a pestilence;—and he fell into a confused and chaotic wondering whether the youth were really levelling those barbed arrows at his heart, or whether they only struck into its core at random. But again persuading himself that it was his own guilty conscience which thus self-appropriated the boy's remarks, he threw off the sense of confusion, shame, and annoyance which had seized upon him;—and he was just on the point of making some observation in order to put an end to a discourse so little palatable, when a loud double knock at the front-door resounded through the mansion.

Rao bit his lip with a sudden paroxysm of spite and vexation at having the interview with his master thus interrupted: then, gliding from the room, he returned at the expiration of a couple of minutes, ushering in Mr. Cresswell, Lord Florimel's solicitor.

CHAPTER CLVIII.

MENACING PROSPECTS.

THE professional adviser of Lord Florimel presented a striking contrast with Mr. Rigden, the attorney to Earl Montgomery. For inasmuch as the latter was cold—wary—suspicious—and keen in every sense of the word, the former was bustling—active—frank—and generous. Not that he possessed one atom less legal ability than the other: but he was a man who studied to deal honourably alike with clients and adversaries—and he would have scorned the petty chicanery and devious proceedings to which Mr. Rigden unhesitatingly had recourse when it was worth his while to put such illegitimate modes of action into requisition.

In person Mr. Cresswell was short, thin, and pale-faced: his features, though sharp, wore an expression of mingled good humour and intelligence;—and his conversation as well as his manner denoted the frankness of an honest man.

After the usual salutations were exchanged between the nobleman and his attorney, and the latter had taken a seat in compliance with the for-

mer's invitation, the object of this professional visit was explained.

"I am truly sorry to be the bearer of evil tidings to your lordship," said Mr. Cresswell: "but my duty prompted me to lose no time in calling to acquaint your lordship with something unpleasant that has occurred."

"I cannot conceive how anything of a disagreeable nature can possibly occur with regard to my affairs," observed Lord Florimel, surveying his solicitor with astonishment: "but pray explain yourself."

"I have just received a letter, my lord," resumed the man of business, "from an attorney named Rigden, stating that inasmuch as he is aware of my having the honour to be your lordship's professional adviser, he wishes to know whether I will receive service of the necessary process in the commencement of a suit which, it appears, he is instructed to open against your lordship."

"A suit against me!" exclaimed Florimel. "And for what purpose?—on what ground?"

"A claimant has started in respect to your lordship's estates and the peerage which your lordship enjoys," replied Mr. Cresswell.

"But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated the young nobleman. "Who is the claimant?—and what are the pretences set forth?"

"The claimant, my lord," answered Cresswell, "is a certain Mr. Woodfall—George Woodfall——"

"Ah! Woodfall!" cried Florimel, struck with a sudden reminiscence and likewise with a feeling of alarm. "I remember to have read certain proceedings which were instituted by a Mr. Woodfall some fifty or sixty years ago against my grandfather, respecting the peerage and estates which were then held by my ancestor and which have descended to me. But when the affair came to be properly argued before the House of Lords, it was given against that Mr. Woodfall in the most unequivocal manner. I presume, however, that the present claimant who has thus suddenly sprung up, is a descendant of that same Mr. Woodfall of whom I have just spoken."

"No doubt of it, my lord," said Mr. Cresswell. "But at present I am altogether in the dark as to the grounds of his claims, Mr. Rigden having merely written me the formal letter usual in the initiative of such cases."

"And of course you have undertaken to receive the process on my behalf?" observed Florimel, inquiringly.

"I instantaneously returned Mr. Rigden an answer to that effect," said the attorney.

"The whole affair lies in a nut-shell and will be easily settled by the production of certain deeds in my possession," continued Florimel. "In fact, the point, so far as I remember it, may be thus explained:—My great grandfather, when somewhat advanced in years, became enamoured of a young female of humble birth but great beauty. He was a widower and childless. Emma Woodfall, the young person in question, became his mistress in the first instance and subsequently his wife. Two sons were the issue of that connexion; but it has been very satisfactorily ascertained that the marriage did not take place until *after* the birth of the elder son. Consequently he was illegitimate, and could not possibly have claimed the peerage under any circumstances, nor the estates except under the provisions of his father's will. No will in his favour was ever made: at least, none has ever been produced. He married early—had issue—and died before his father. From him are the Woodfalls descended; whereas the branch to which I belong is that of the younger son. This younger son was unquestionably born in wedlock; and consequently his posterity have enjoyed the honours and estates of the house of Florimel. When the affair came before the House of Lords fifty years ago, it was the heir of the elder brother disputing the title and right of the younger brother himself. The point alleged was that the marriage between the old lord and Emma Woodfall had taken place a few days *before*, and not some weeks *after*, the birth of the elder son. But the evidence was by no means conclusive; on the contrary, it was shown to the satisfaction of the House of Lords that the elder son was *not* born in wedlock. Notwithstanding the decision of their lordships confirming my grandfather in the possession of the peerage of Florimel, the suit still went on in Chancery respecting the estates: but an amicable arrangement at length took place, in virtue of which the Woodfall family—that is to say, the heirs of the elder brother so often alluded to—received a certain sum of money and resigned all future claims to the property. This compact was effected by a document duly drawn up; and which document is amongst the title-deeds and other family papers now in my possession. You thus comprehend the whole transaction; and you may likewise form a tolerably accurate notion of the nature of those claims which the present Mr. Woodfall is likely to advance."

"I understand the matter thoroughly, my lord," observed Mr. Cresswell. "It is very fortunate that you are in possession of the document to which you have alluded: because the claim to the peerage and that to the estates are in some sense very distinct. You have the decision of the House of Lords to advance against the former; while the deed of compact is a complete answer to the latter. Does your lordship know anything of this George Woodfall?"

"Only that he is an artist," replied Florimel. "His father was a dissolute man, who lavished a large fortune with the most wanton extravagance; and the two branches of the family have been for years estranged from each other. I mean that the branch to which I belong and that of the Woodfalls have held no communion for many years past. The breach took place before I was born;—and therefore I cannot be accused of any neglect towards this George Woodfall, inasmuch as he never applied to me for succour or assistance. At all events, his claims are utterly unfounded; and perhaps the better course for you to adopt, Mr. Cresswell, would be to call on Mr. Rigden—explain the whole matter to him—show him the deed of compact—and satisfy him at once that his client has not the faintest ground for a law-suit."

"The plan suggested by your lordship shall be duly carried into effect," said Mr. Cresswell. "You had better give me all the documents at once; and I will look over them this evening, in order to be well prepared to see Mr. Rigden to-morrow."

"I will fetch you the papers immediately," observed Lord Florimel.

With these words, the young nobleman quitted the room; and as he passed through the hall towards the marble staircase, he bade Rao follow him with a light. The youth accordingly procured a candle; and Florimel repaired to his bed-chamber, attended by the sable page.

"Drag forth that tin-box from under the couch, my boy," said the nobleman: then, the moment this was done, he added, "And now take something to sweep off the dust before I open it."

Florimel's command was forthwith obeyed;—and when the box was thus rendered fit for his aristocratic fingers to touch, he proceeded to open it with a key attached to a small bunch which he was in the habit of carrying in his pocket.

But scarcely had he raised the lid, when a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from his lips: for, behold! the papers were gone—the tin-case was empty!

"Is anything the matter, my lord?" inquired Rao, contemplating his master with looks expressive of a deep and earnest interest.

"Almighty God! what can be the meaning of this?" exclaimed Florimel, a ghastly pallor now spreading itself over his countenance and a nervous trembling seizing on his entire frame. "The papers gone!—the sanctity of my own chamber violated by the hand of a thief!—what does it all mean?"

"Your lordship seems to miss something of importance?" said Rao, still gazing earnestly upon him.

"Importance, boy!" ejaculated the bewildered and terrified nobleman, regardless of what he was saying: "importance, forsooth! It is ruin—absolute ruin to me——or at least the chance of ruin!" he exclaimed, in a wild tone and with frantic gesture.

"Ruin!" murmured Rao to himself, as he turned aside for a moment, to conceal heaven only knows what expression of countenance as he repeated that word—that appalling word—"Ruin!"

"I cannot have placed the documents elsewhere," said the nobleman, struggling to wrestle against the excitement of his feelings and sooth himself into the calmness requisite to look this menacing calamity face to face. "And yet it must be so! Yes—I have doubtless secured these papers elsewhere—now forgetting alike the place and the circumstance itself. Such will unquestionably prove the case," he added, in a musing tone: "for no one could have visited that box without leaving some trace of violence behind. Yet it was not broken open—the lock was not forced—and the key is always in my possession. During the day it is about my person: by night it is placed under my pillow. True, I sleep with my chamber-door unlocked: but who could possibly have done this at night-time without disturbing me?"

Thus mused Lord Florimel in a tone which, although low, was still sufficiently audible to reach the ears of Rao, whose presence he seemed to have forgotten, and who was standing at a short distance with his eyes fixed steadfastly upon his master's countenance.

For a minute longer did Florimel stand gazing down into the empty box, straining to wring from his memory some recollection to guide him to the discovery of the missing papers; then, all on a sudden feeling how useless it was for him thus to give way to a wildering perplexity instead of adopting the practical measure of a rigorous search, he turned abruptly towards a chest of drawers which stood behind him.

"What! are you still here?" he demanded of Rao, whose presence actually startled him for the moment.

"Your lordship did not command me to retire," answered the youth, in a subdued and mild tone.

"True! Assist me, then, to examine all these drawers," said Florimel. "It is a parcel of very important papers which I have lost—or rather mislaid—for *lost* they can scarcely be," he added, with the sickly endeavour to buoy himself up by means of that hope to which men cling even in their very desperation.

But vainly were the drawers searched: fruitlessly were all their contents flung forth and scattered upon the carpet. The documents were not to be found! The cupboards in that chamber and the adjoining dressing-room were next examined; but with equal want of success. Every nook was searched—every corner was ransacked: still no signs of the missing papers were discovered. At length Lord Florimel remembered the plate-chest: surely he must have deposited the deeds there? But no: not a trace of them was visible;—and, after three quarters of an hour's fruitless investigation, he was compelled to admit to himself that the documents must have indeed been stolen!

And now amidst the whirlwind of perplexing and torturing ideas which swept through his brain, his suspicions could settle upon no one. There was not in his household a single person whose name suggested itself in association with this deed. All was darkness—all was mystery: and in spite of his own settled convictions—in spite of the only one possible conclusion to which he could now come—namely, *that the papers must have been purloined*—he still sought to delude himself with the belief that they were only mislaid,—thus hoping on even against the death of hope itself!

But suddenly reflecting that it would be unwise to suffer the magnitude of his loss and the menacing aspect of its nature to become generally known, he made some observation to Rao to the effect that it was very annoying, but not quite so serious as he had at first fancied: then, bidding the boy precede him with the light, he hurried back to the apartment where he had left his solicitor.

To this gentleman he imparted the mysterious loss which he had experienced; and the worthy solicitor, fully comprehending how serious it was, and well knowing that Mr. Rigden's habitual sharp practice would induce him to seize with avidity upon any point advantageous to a client,—Mr. Cresswell, we say, deplored the occurrence with the most unfeigned sincerity. He however recommended that the misfortune should be hushed up with the utmost secrecy—so that the enemy might not learn the weak point which had thus been laid bare on Lord Florimel's side.

"Alas!" said the young nobleman; "this precaution, I am afraid, will prove very unnecessary. For if the papers be really stolen, they must have been purloined for a special purpose: and to answer what end could they be taken, unless it be to serve the interests of this claimant to my peerage and my property? Oh! my dear Cresswell, I have a presentiment striking cold to my heart, and warning me that

I am a lost—a ruined—a disgraced and despoiled man! Misfortunes are accumulating thickly upon me. The object of my dearest, holiest, tenderest love suddenly becomes estranged to me;—and now a more worldly calamity threatens me with destruction!"

Thus speaking, the unfortunate young nobleman gave way to his tears.

The kind-hearted attorney endeavoured to console him: but this attempt was by no means an easy task. At length Florimel's natural dignity as a man effected what the soothing words of the lawyer could not accomplish; and recalling every moral energy to his aid, he said, "This weakness is unworthy of me! I will tutor my mind to battle valiantly against misfortune; and, strangely altered though my prospects have suddenly become, I will not give way to despair so long as the feeblest glimmer of hope remains. Nor will I believe that the worst is in store for me, until the worst shall really have happened. In the meantime, my dear Cresswell, you must take all the necessary measures for the defence of this suit; and we shall at least have the satisfaction of fighting our foes hand to hand and foot to foot."

The lawyer was well pleased to observe his noble client entering upon this improved frame of mind; and, faithfully promising that the battle should not be lost without a gallant stand and a desperate struggle, he took his departure.

For some time after he was thus left alone, Lord Florimel remained plunged in a deep reverie: but suddenly starting from his meditations and his seat at the same moment, as an idea struck him, he wrapped himself up in his cloak and issued from the mansion.

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An hour afterwards, Mr. Rigden received the following letter, the contents of which were written in a feigned hand, but evidently by a female:—

"The documents have been missed by Lord Florimel. He and his attorney are in a perfect consternation. They know that their cause will be lost: but they purpose to make *a gallant stand* and enter upon *a desperate struggle* against you and your client. Their conduct, however, only serves to prove more than ever the vital importance of those papers. Florimel entertains not the slightest suspicion *how* the deeds have disappeared: but he *does* suspect that they have found their way into the hands of either yourself or Mr. Woodfall. Be cautious—be firm—be secret!

"From time to time I shall give you such information as I may be enabled to glean, and which may prove beneficial to your client's interests."

This letter bore neither date nor signature: but Mr. Rigden had no difficulty in comprehending that it emanated from the same hand which had put the stolen documents into his possession—those documents the vital importance of which was now made more apparent than ever.

CHAPTER CLIX.

SCENES AT THE BEGGAR'S STAFF.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—the same evening on which the incidents of the two preceding chapters occurred; and Carrotty Poll was seated with her friend the Gallows' Widow in the little parlour behind the bar at the Beggar's Staff. They were discussing a pint of wine between them; and their conversation was turning upon many matters,—speculations as to what could have become of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman, and remarks on the continued absence of Mobbs being amongst the topics thus commented upon.

Their discourse was all the more earnest and continuous, inasmuch as there happened to be but few guests in the public room at the time; and thus their confabulation was not interrupted—the services of the slip-shod waiter being equal to the demands made upon the exciseable articles dispensed from the bar-counter.

"Well, I wonder what *can* be keeping Mobbs away like this," said Carrotty Poll, making the remark for the tenth time on the present occasion. "Surely no harm can have befallen him?"

"He is too wide awake to let the milliner get the advantage over him," observed the Gallows' Widow. "That she murdered Grumley, we are quite certain: but that she could succeed in getting Mobbs into her net, I do not for an instant suppose."

"And yet three days have now passed," said Carrotty Poll; "and he does not make his appearance. He came to tell us how his first interview with Mrs. Brace on the subject of Grumley's unaccountable absence went off——"

"Or rather how it was interrupted by the screams that came from another part of the milliner's house," observed Lizzy Marks, the Gallows' Widow. "But Mobbs told us that she had confessed the deed—that she even showed him where Grumley was buried—and that he was going back again to enter into arrangements with her. Now, we have only two conjectures to choose between——"

"Either that Mobbs has followed the fate of his master, or that he has bolted with the cash extorted from the milliner," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "Is that what you mean?"

"Just so," replied the Gallows' Widow. "But I, for my part, do *not* think that Mobbs has been made away with; on the contrary, I firmly believe that he has made away with himself."

"In other words, that he has cut and run in order to cheat us out of our *regulars*," said Carrotty Poll. "Well, if he don't make his appearance soon, I shall entertain the same opinion. But we wont judge hastily: circumstances may be keeping him away for a few days—and these he will explain, should he turn up once more. Let us therefore wait a little while before we resolve on adopting any step in the matter."

"And in the meantime Mrs. Brace may bolt, and we shall lose every chance of getting a shilling from her," said the Gallows' Widow.

"That is not likely," responded the Big Beggarman's daughter. "Whether she has made away with Mobbs or compromised the thing with him, she believes herself safe and secure, depend upon it,—and she will not easily be induced to give up her brilliant position and her splendid establishment at the West End. No: she will not run away, Lizzy: I am not afraid of that. And if Mobbs should really be still negotiating with her, he would be precious savage if we were to interfere in the business. It would at once show Mrs. Brace that others were in the secret besides himself; and *then* she really would bolt beyond all manner of doubt."

"Well, have it your own way, Poll," said Elizabeth Marks. "We will remain quiet a few days; and if Mobbs don't turn up in the meantime, then we must hold a serious conversation to decide how we shall act."

"I am glad you've fallen into my views on the subject," observed Poll.

"And now, when I think of it," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, "I've got something of importance to tell you. In a word, I'm pretty sure that I have discovered a clue to the abode of that Julia Lightfoot——"

"Mrs. Page, you mean?" cried Carrotty Poll. "You know she married that rascal Page who gave evidence at the Old Bailey against Ramsey and Martin, and also against my father and Briggs. But what information have you procured concerning them?"

"The Kinchin Grand, who has been looking out for them this long time," answered Carrotty Poll, "saw them yesterday morning looking at two houses which are to let in the Edgeware Road—Paradise Villas I think the terrace is called—and he afterwards dogged them as far as a house-agent's office in the neighbourhood. When they came out again, he heard Page observe to his wife that '*the house would just suit them;*' and Julia answered that '*they should be able to move into it next week.*'—So, you perceive, we are on the right scent at last."

"Capital!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll. "But why didn't the Kinchin Grand follow them to their present place of residence? If any thing should happen to prevent them from taking that house in the Edgeware Road, all traces of them may once more be lost—and I never shall be happy till we've revenged ourselves on that cursed Julia and her husband."

"The Kinchin Grand would have followed them home," answered the Gallows' Widow; "but they took a coach immediately after they came out of the house-agent's office—and the vehicle drove too uick for my spy to keep them in view. However,

there seems to be little doubt, from the observations they exchanged and which I have repeated to you, that they took the house of the agent yesterday morning. If so, depend upon it we *will be revenged* before they have been in possession of their new abode many weeks," added the Gallows' Widow, her countenance lowering into an expression of ominous ferocity.

Carrotty Poll was about to make some observation in approval of this dark menace, when the waiter entered to inform her "that a gentleman desired to speak to the master or the mistress of the house." Both the Big Beggarman's daughter and the Gallows' Widow rose and peeped forth at the visitor, who was standing at the bar-counter, muffled in a cloak, but with enough of his countenance revealed to enable them to catch a distinct view of his features. He was a total stranger to them—young—very good-looking—and with nothing in his appearance to excite their suspicions in any way: they accordingly resumed their seats and bade the waiter conduct the gentleman into their presence. This instruction was immediately obeyed; and the visitor was showed into the parlour.

"I am perfectly unknown to you," he said, in a soft and pleasing voice, as he took the chair to which Carrotty Poll pointed: "but I trust that you will pardon this intrusion, inasmuch as I am well prepared to pay for any services which may be rendered me in the business that has brought me hither, and to bestow a handsome recompense for any trouble that I may give."

"Who are you, sir?—and what has brought you to this place?" inquired Carrotty Poll, speaking in her politest tone.

"I am Lord Florimel," answered the young nobleman—for he indeed it was; "and my business is of a twofold nature, as I will immediately explain to you."

"First of all, my lord," said Carrotty Poll, "please to inform us who recommended you to apply here for any service that you may need at the hands of the people belonging to this house, or frequenting it."

"The explanation will not offend, I hope?" observed Florimel, with some little hesitation.

"It can't offend, my lord, if it is the truth," was the response.

"You speak with a frankness that shall experience an equal degree of candour on my side," immediately resumed the nobleman. "In a word, then, every one who knows anything at all of London life, must be aware that the Beggar's Staff is a great resort for persons of a particular class;—and I fancy that you are not altogether unaccustomed to receive visits from noblemen and gentlemen who on occasions stand in want of able hands, keen eyes, and secret servitors, for all of which auxiliaries they are able and willing to pay handsomely. Well, I see by your countenance that such is the fact;—and you therefore cannot be astonished if the reputation of the Beggar's Staff is tolerably familiar to all those who may be termed *men of the world* or *men about town*."

"The explanation is perfectly satisfactory," said Carrotty Poll. "And now for the business which has brought your lordship here. You may speak candidly and openly: if we enter into your views, whatever we undertake will be performed secretly, promptly, and faithfully—and if we decline, there is no harm done."

"I do not think you will refuse," observed Florimel; "because I am going to ask you to do nothing for which I am not prepared to pay a handsome price. In the first instance, I wish that some active, intelligent, and persevering agent should be set to work to discover the abode of a certain lady, whose name and description I will give you. I mention a description, because she may have assumed another name. I must however observe that she is a lady of unblemished virtue and stainless character; and that it is because I am deeply attached to her and that she has taken offence at some fancied misconduct on my part—it is for these reasons, I say, and for no dishonourable motive, that I am so desirous to trace out her present abode."

"We have nothing to do with motives, my lord," said Carrotty Poll; "but we will undertake the service you thus require at our hands. Give me the name and description of the lady, and by to-morrow at mid-day a dozen active agents shall be instituting inquiries in every part of London and its suburbs."

"The lady's name is Pauline Clarendon," returned Florimel: "and here is an accurate description of her personal appearance," he continued, handing a piece of paper to Carrotty Poll. "But mark me well and understand me fully, when I beseech you to conduct this research in such a manner that the proceeding may not reach the ears of Miss Clarendon. For were she to learn that I am adopting such a course to discover her residence, it would only widen the breach now existing between us: indeed, she would never forgive me."

"Your lordship's wishes shall be duly attended to," said Carrotty Poll. "And now what is the second branch of the twofold business that has brought your lordship to the Staff."

"I will explain myself as concisely and yet as plainly as possible," returned the young nobleman. "I am in the habit of keeping certain valuable documents in a large tin case, which stands under the bed in my chamber. The key I always carry about with me during the day, and place it under my pillow at night. It is a peculiar key, made to fit a lock of no ordinary construction. In a word, a mere skeleton key could not possibly open that lock. Nevertheless, I have discovered, within the last two or three hours, that this tin box has been opened—inasmuch as its contents are gone. No violence was used: not a trace of foul play is visible in the matter. And what renders the affair more difficult and mysterious still, is that I cannot fasten my suspicions upon a single soul dwelling beneath my roof: I cannot lay my finger upon the shoulder of any one and say, '*This is the thief!*'"

"And yet the papers must have been purloined for some special purpose?" remarked Carrotty Poll, inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Florimel. "A certain lawyer named Rigden, and a certain person named George Woodfall——"

"An artist?" exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, struck by the name.

"The same," cried the nobleman. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"I have seen him once," was the answer. "He

was then in the service of a certain Mr. Shrubsole, picture-dealer, of Newgate Street."

And the Gallows' Widow exchanged a rapid but significant glance with Carrotty Poll: for the reader cannot have forgotten that Elizabeth Marks became acquainted—if acquaintanceship it could be termed—with George Woodfall on that memorable night when the Magsman escaped from Newgate.

"But pray proceed, my lord," she said: "for the little I know of Mr. Woodfall cannot be rendered in any way available to your lordship's purposes—nor indeed would Mr. Woodfall be over well pleased to renew his acquaintance with me," she added, with that low inward chuckle in which the woman sometimes indulged.

"I was about to observe," continued Florimel, perceiving that the Gallows' Widow had some private reasons of her own for not choosing to be more communicative respecting her knowledge of the young artist,—"I was about to observe that Mr. Woodfall has instituted certain law-proceedings against me, and that a Mr. Rigden is his attorney. Now this Mr. Rigden is a man whose practice is notoriously sharp, and who would not stick at trifles in order to gain his ends. The papers which have been stolen from me, have therefore assuredly found their way into the possession of either Rigden or Woodfall—or perhaps both conjointly. It is of the utmost importance for me to recover them;—and I will give two thousand guineas to the person who shall restore them to me."

Florimel ceased speaking, and looked first at Carrotty Poll, then at the Gallows' Widow, in order to observe the impression which this liberal offer had made upon them. The former started with an actual paroxysm of avaricious feelings suddenly and powerfully excited; while the usually cold and passionless features of the latter instantaneously brightened up with an expression of vivid interest. Then the two women once more exchanged significant looks: but this time they were less furtive and more lingering, as much as to consult each other what reply should be made to the brilliant proposal and what course should be adopted.

"Well, do you think anything can be done in this business?" asked Florimel at length.

"Will your lordship leave the matter entirely in our hands?" demanded Carrotty Poll.

"Yes—with much pleasure, if you can hold out to me any prospect of success," was the immediate response.

"We will do all we can, my lord," rejoined Carrotty Poll: then, after a brief pause, she added, "For I have already a certain plan in my head. Of course your lordship does not care how the deeds are recovered, so long as they are restored to you?"

"How *can* I care what means are adopted to accomplish that aim?" cried the young nobleman. "Have I not been scandalously robbed in this matter? Therefore if you choose to fight my enemies with the same weapons that they have employed against me, I shall not experience the slightest remorse."

"Then there is no more to be said upon the business—at least for the present," observed Carrotty Poll.

"Yes—we must have a description of the deeds," said the Gallows' Widow, who fancied that her companion in iniquity meditated a burglary in Rigden's house, through the agency of some of their numerous adherents and friends.

"No—I don't want any description at all," exclaimed the Big Beggarman's daughter, in her sharp vixenish tones. "You have no idea, Lizzy, what my present scheme is: but you shall know all by and bye. Don't think, however, for a moment that I mean to have Rigden's house broken open and robbed. *That* game won't do at any price. It might fail—or the wrong papers might be brought away—or the real ones may not be there at all: in a word, a burglary for such a purpose would have a thousand chances against its success, and might involve us all in trouble. No—the thing must be managed by stratagem—a good stratagem too;—and that scheme I have already got cut and dried in my own mind. Some weeks—perhaps months, may elapse before this scheme succeeds: but I will pledge my soul as to its triumph in the long run," added the young woman, with so strong an emphasis and such an evident conviction of the truth of what she was saying, that the flame of hope once more burnt brightly in Lord Florimel's breast.

"Well, my worthy creature," he said, in a flattering tone, "I leave myself entirely in your hands. The papers will not be wanted—or rather their loss can do no possible harm, for some months to come, inasmuch as the law's delays are numerous indeed. And now tell me whether you would like to receive an earnest of my liberal intentions with regard to both the matters that you have taken in hand?"

"You may give us a hundred pounds on account, my lord, if you will," said Carrotty Poll, her palm itching to feel the touch of the young nobleman's gold.

"A hundred pounds!" he exclaimed: "I will give you five hundred—because I am confident that you are sincere and that you will accomplish everything you have undertaken."

Lord Florimel accordingly counted down bank notes for the sum he had named; and the two women's eyes sparkled with joy as they contemplated the welcome pieces of "flimsy-paper." The young nobleman then took his leave; and wrapping himself well up in his capacious cloak, he sallied forth from the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER CLX.

THE UNKNOWN LADY ONCE MORE.

It was about eleven o'clock that night when Lord Florimel returned to his own mansion in Piccadilly. Rao was instantaneously in attendance upon him; and the moment he had conducted his master into the parlour where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate and the table was spread for supper, he handed the young nobleman a letter.

"The person who brought this, requested your lordship's earliest attention to it," said the page.

"And who did bring it?" inquired Florimel, listlessly, as he threw himself into an arm-chair near the fire.

"A tall footman, my lord," was the response: "but I do not know in whose service he is."

"Ah! a tall footman?" echoed Florimel, now suddenly inspired with a sentiment of curiosity: and glancing at the letter, he observed that the address

was penned in precisely the same affected and artificial scrawl as that of the envelope which had contained the masquerade-ticket four or five days previously.

His first impulse was to throw the letter unopened into the fire and thereby offer up his feelings of mingled curiosity and tender interest as a sacrifice to his love for Pauline Clarendon: but a second thought reminded him that she had voluntarily, spontaneously, and deliberately released him from all allegiance towards her;—and, to speak the truth, he was precisely in one of those humours when a sense of loneliness and desolation prompts the individual to court any company that may afford a distraction from his gloomy meditations, or plunge into any adventure that may seem calculated to wean the mind from melancholy topics of thought.

He accordingly opened the letter and read the contents in the following manner:—

"The Unknown Lady requests an interview with the Lord Florimel. She would not so far forget her own dignity as to solicit this favour, after the cold and even insulting neglect with which her overtures for a meeting were treated by the Lord Florimel the other night: but it is of some importance to herself that she should have five minutes' conversation with his lordship as soon as possible. Should his lordship be absent when the bearer of this note calls at his lordship's mansion in Piccadilly, the same individual will return at the hour when it is probable that the Lord Florimel will be at home. The Unknown Lady therefore throws herself upon the Lord Florimel's generosity, and beseeches him to accompany her domestic whithersoever he may lead and under whatsoever circumstances of secrecy he may suggest."

"Did the bearer of this note inquire when I should return home?" demanded Florimel, as soon as he had read the contents of the missive.

"He did, my lord," replied Rao; "and I assured him that I expected your lordship home every moment."

"What farther observation did he make?"

"He said that he should take the liberty of returning at midnight precisely, for your lordship's answer."

"Did you notice what kind of a looking man he was?" demanded Florimel.

"He studiously averted his countenance, my lord, as he stood upon the front-door steps," replied Rao.

"How know you that this was *studiously* done?" asked Florimel, somewhat surprised at the observation.

"It struck me, my lord, that the man was desirous to conceal his features from observation," was the calm and unembarrassed response.

"Well—when he returns at twelve, tell him that I will accompany him at once," said Florimel, after a few moments' reflection;—"and then come and let me know of his arrival."

Rao bowed and quitted the room.

"Yes—I will grant the Unknown Lady this interview which she so earnestly solicits," thought Florimel within himself, as soon as the door had closed behind the sable page. "Not that I will yield to temptation or forget my vows to Pauline. No—all the blandishments of that voluptuous creature whom I am presently to meet, shall be vainly expended upon me: all her seductive wiles and amorous fascinations will find me only the more resolute in my resistance—only the more stoically determined in my anchoritism. And yet it would really serve Miss Pauline right if I *did* give her some good ground to be jealous,—since, for want of real motives, she flies to imaginary ones in order to pick a quarrel with me. But, no—I will not act so ungenerous a part: I will not play so treacherous a game. I love Pauline—love her devotedly; and I will remain true to my vows. At the same time it would be unhandsome in the extreme—ungentlemanly to a degree—uncourteous and cowardly in every sense of the word, to refuse the Unknown Lady the interview which she so earnestly desires. Besides, it will serve as a little distraction for me in my present mournful mood and unsettled position; and it will likewise afford me an opportunity of testing the strength of my affection for Pauline. Ah! cruel Pauline—if you only knew how great is the temptation which I am this night prepared to resist on your account, you would not continue estranged from me!"

And yet, while thus musing, Lord Florimel could not restrain his ardent imagination from retracing the path of those pleasures which he had once enjoyed in the society of the Unknown Lady, and which he had so graphically described to Lord Montgomery, — pleasures, the memory of which now made the blood run with a hotter glow in his veins, his cheeks flush with a deeper animation, and his pulse beat with a quicker continuity,—pleasures, the recollection of which had already more than half weaned him from his fealty towards Pauline, despite of the efforts which he used to persuade himself that he was fully competent to resist all temptation.

But, ah! reader, blame him not too severely—castigate him not too harshly with thy vituperation: for remember that he had no longer the same motive which rendered him strong to refuse and made him potent to resist when the Unknown's overtures were signified to him through the medium of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. *Then* he was in possession of the love and confidance of Pauline: *now* both were withdrawn. On *that* occasion he had naught to trouble his mind with care nor harass it with gloomy presentiment: but on *this* occasion he felt as if some friend were suddenly extending a hand to him at the moment when the solace of friendship became so highly necessary and so acceptably welcome.

He was still pondering upon the incident which had thus unexpectedly presented itself as a means of diversion for his troubled thoughts, when Rao entered the room to announce that the tall footman had returned.

Florimel immediately started from his seat—resumed his hat and cloak—and went out to the front door where the tall footman was standing in such a position that the broad brim of his hat completely shaded his countenance from the reflection of the hall-lamp.

"Lead on—I will follow you," said Lord Florimel, in a hasty whisper.

The tall footman accordingly moved rapidly away, proceeding along Piccadilly in the direction of Hyde Park,—Lord Florimel keeping close in his rear.

But Rao was likewise following at a distance — unperceived and unsuspected by either the tall footman or the young nobleman.

In a few minutes the corner of Hyde Park was gained; and the mysterious footman struck into

the enclosure. Just glancing round to assure himself that Lord Florimel was close behind, he continued his way at a rapid pace, until a dark equipage appeared at a little distance. The moon was shining with a feeble and sickly lustre: but there was light enough to enable Lord Florimel to observe that the vehicle was a barouche, of a sombre colour and with no armorial bearings upon the panels—that it was drawn by two dark horses —and that the countenance of the coachman, as he sate upon his box, was almost completely muffled up in a shawl neckerchief.

"Enter, my lord," said the tall footman, as he hurriedly opened the door of the carriage.

Florimel instantaneously obeyed the request thus made, although it sounded rather like a command that was imperiously given: but the impression of neither tone nor words dwelt upon the nobleman's mind more than an instant—for, on entering the barouche, he was immediately received in a pair of arms that snatched him to a heaving bosom, while a moist plump mouth, whence exhaled the most fragrant of breaths, simultaneously fastened itself upon his own lips.

The door was closed with promptitude—all was darkness within the vehicle—and, as the splendid animals whirled it rapidly away, Lord Florimel sank unresistingly into the warm and fervid embrace which had thus received him. Alas! poor Pauline, thou wast then forgotten indeed.

Meantime Rao had kept close enough behind his master and the tall footman so as never to lose sight of them for a single instant; and yet he had remained sufficiently aloof to prevent them from perceiving that any one was dogging their footsteps. The equipage was waiting beneath the shade of some trees in Hyde Park; and thus, favoured by that gloominess of locality as well as by his own dark apparel and sable complexion, the agile and wary youth was enabled to glide *beneath* the carriage just at the moment when the tall footman was opening the door for Florimel to jump in. Rao then clung with his arms and legs to the beam that passed under the barouche; and, retaining his hold there with the tenacity of a monkey clinging to a bough, he was whirled away along with the equipage.

We have already observed that the interior of the vehicle was quite dark—the blinds being drawn up; and thus Lord Florimel was as unable to obtain even a glimpse of his fair companion as he was on the former occasion. But no sooner did he feel her lips joining to his own in a long, impassioned, fervid caress—no sooner did he experience the warmth of her embrace and catch the murmurs of joy and gladness which escaped from her tongue during the intervals of those devouring kisses,—no sooner, too, did his hand encounter the uncovered, glowing bosom which was heaving against his chest,—than he immediately became aware that this was indeed the heroine of the night of love, mystery, and pleasure, the details of which he had recounted to Lord Montgomery.

"Gabriel, my beloved friend," murmured the lady at length, in that soft and fluid voice which was so familiar to his ear—because, if once heard, it could never be forgotten,—"are you angry with me for having adopted a stratagem to bring you back to my arms?"

"Angry!—Oh! who could be angry with you, ovely unknown?" exclaimed Florimel, his voice broken with a profound sigh of pleasure. "But what stratagem have you adopted?"

"That letter, which told you that some business of importance rendered an interview necessary," replied the lady.

"And such is not the fact?" said the young nobleman, interrogatively.

"No other motive save love—no other impulse save passion, prompted my conduct, Gabriel," whispered the lady, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and lavishing upon her companion blandishments that would have thrown the veriest anchorite into the delirium of a blissful intoxication.

"Dangerous as you are enchanting—omnipotent for mischief as you must be captivatingly beautiful!" exclaimed the young nobleman, his soul already exalted to an enthusiastic pitch;—and, as he alluded to the personal loveliness with which he supposed the fascinating unknown to be endowed, he passed his hand gently over her countenance, pausing as it were at every feature. "Yes—you are handsome—very handsome," he continued, in a musing tone: "your face is nobly formed—perfect in all its details;—your head is elegantly shaped—and your hair is of velvet softness. Then your neck—Ah! that is smooth as the fairest skin can be——"

"But I must not suffer you to pay me all the compliments and receive none in return," exclaimed the lady: then, as her own fair hand played caressingly with Lord Florimel's countenance, she said, "And you too, my Gabriel, are gloriously handsome ——no, not gloriously—but femininely handsome—and I love you—oh! I love you, Gabriel—my own dear Gabriel!"

And as she gave utterance to these words with a sort of cannibal concentration of tone and feeling,—that is to say, with a fervid earnestness and a warmth of passion as if she could have devoured the object of her eulogy,—she strained him to her glowing breast—she lavished upon him the tenderest and the most fervid caresses—she seemed ready to abandon herself to him even to the extent of her immortal soul, were it possible, the same as on the former occasion she had with such a sensuous enthusiasm abandoned to him her person.

"And now, my beloved Gabriel," she murmured, as she lay in his arms panting with joy and palpitating with thrilling emotions,—"and now I must take you seriously and solemnly to task for treating me with such cold disdain the other night!"

"Ah! I know to what you allude, my charming friend," exclaimed Florimel: "but may I hope that you will not question me upon this point?"

"On the contrary, I must exact a full and faithful explanation," cried the lady. "For it is no slight nor venial offence which you committed upon that occasion," she continued, in a tone of good-natured raillery. "Remember, my dear Gabriel, that when we met and parted on a certain night fifteen or sixteen months ago, you besought me to accord you another and speedy interview. I promised that I would: but circumstances afforded me no opportunity until the other day. Then I conveyed to you, by means as significant as any that could be adopted, an overture for a renewal of our acquaintance—our friendship—our love: in a word, I gave you an appointment—the manner and the place being symbolised, or rather expressed, by the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. And yet you availed

yourself not of that intimation: you treated me with indifference—with scorn—with disdain—with contempt;—and if I did not love you dearly—very dearly, Gabriel—yes, very dearly indeed," added the Unknown, while she bestowed several tender caresses upon the young nobleman,—"I should not have proved so unmindful of my own dignity as to have courted your society again. But I forgive you, Gabriel, for that instance of coldness and neglect,—I forgive you because I love you—and because I am certain that you would not intentionally and wilfully wound the feelings of one who is thus devotedly attached to you."

"No—not for worlds!" exclaimed Florimel: and even as he yielded himself up heart and soul to that whirlpool of sensations and feelings which now engulfed him, he experienced a sharp pang of remorse striking through his heart as the image of Pauline hovered amidst the confusion of his brain.

"Tell me, Gabriel—tell me," said the unknown syren, "wherefore you absented yourself from that masquerade?"

"Oh! if you would wrest the truth from me!" exclaimed Florimel, with a species of shudder as the image of Pauline was now brought back more vividly still to his memory.

"Tell me—tell me that truth, whatever it may be," murmured the lady, redoubling her caresses and literally endeavouring not only to overpower her companion with the ravishing ecstacies of her blandishments, but likewise to absorb as it were his whole soul in her own and thus render him entirely captive to her will—her sense—and her sentiment. "Explain to me the cause of your absence on that occasion, dearest Gabriel," she said with a voice full of irresistible sweetness and with a manner which, though utter darkness prevailed in the carriage, was nevertheless sensibly fraught with a coaxing charm of superlative seductiveness.

"Listen, then, my unknown friend," said Florimel. "I love a young lady—a certain Miss Pauline Clarendon—who is beautiful as an angel and jealous as a dragon;—and when I received the ticket and the domino the other day, I was basking in the sunshine of her favour—consequently I resisted the temptation held out by yourself."

"And now—has the aspect of your love undergone a change?" inquired the lady.

"Yes—for Pauline is angry with me, I know not wherefore," responded Florimel; "and indeed she has bade me think of her no more! Therefore, when I received your note this evening,—partially because I was miserable and required solace—and also somewhat because I felt it would be unkind and discourteous to a degree not to obey the desire specified in your letter,—for these reasons, I say, did I keep the present appointment."

"And now are you sorry that you have done so?" asked the unknown, in a voice that trembled as if with apprehension relative to what the response might be.

"No—I am *not* sorry—nor do I repent," exclaimed the young nobleman, nerving himself with that species of desperation which prompts the individual who commits an imprudence, a perfidy, or a crime, to plunge headlong into the tide of the enjoyment constituting the temptation and therein endeavour to drown memory—remorse—the image of the absent wronged one—and all the better feelings of the soul!

"Dearest, dearest Gabriel," murmured the lady, her tone and manner full of the enthusiasm of mingled joy, passion, and triumph: "how delicious is it to receive such an assurance from your lips! But tell me,—Oh! tell me whether you have religiously kept my secret—that is to say, *our* secret—the secret of that adventure which brought us together fifteen months ago, and which is now renewed again to-night. Tell me, I say, whether you have maintained this secret inviolable——Oh! you tremble, Gabriel—your hand shakes in my own—and you draw yourself back with a species of embarrassment from my embrace! By these signs, then, do I know that you have not kept the seal of inviolability altogether upon your lips: and yet do not fancy that I am angry with you—for, after all, how little was there to tell which could possibly be fraught with any chance of discovery."

"Once—and once only, dearest friend," murmured Lord Florimel, in a tone of deep contrition, "have I opened my lips respecting that adventure. Solemnly and sacredly do I assure you that with the single exception to which I now allude, the adventure has been religiously treasured up in my bosom."

"And who was the confidant that you thus selected, Gabriel?" inquired the lady.

"A friend—a sincere, trustworthy, and valued friend of mine," was the answer,—"a man with whom I enjoy the fullest intimacy."

"But who is he?" asked the unknown.

"Lord Montgomery," replied Florimel. "Do you know him?—for of course you must have heard of him, no matter in what circle of society you move."

"Yes—I have heard of him—and I think I have seen him," said the lady, in a quiet manner. "And now tell me, Gabriel, what you did with the blue domino which I sent you."

"How is it possible that you can trouble yourself concerning a piece of masquerading trumpery?" cried Florimel, amazed at the question which had just been put to him.

"Simply because it may serve *you* for another occasion," was the immediate response of the ready-witted lady,—"should you take it into your head to visit the next masquerade and meet me there. Then, being aware of the precise character of the domino which you have already in your possession, I should know whom to accost in the crowded assembly."

"Yes, dearest lady—we will meet again, most assuredly," exclaimed Florimel, catching her in his arms: "and it shall be at a masquerade if you will. But the dress to which you allude cannot serve the purpose on any such future occasion, inasmuch as I caused it to be destroyed within a few minutes after I received it."

"You caused it to be destroyed?" said the lady, in so peculiar a tone of mingled incredulity and surprise that Florimel actually started at the seriousness which she thus appeared to be attaching to an affair fraught with so little consequence in his estimation.

"I pledge you my honour most solemnly—most sacredly," he exclaimed, "that I gave the blue domino to one of my dependants with orders for its instantaneous destruction; and I have no reason to believe that my commands were disobeyed. And if you ask me, dearest lady, wherefore I took so extraordinary a step, I will candidly explain it by the assurance that it was to place the object of

temptation beyond my reach. But wherefore do you attach so much importance to these trivial details?—of what avail is the fate of a paltry blue domino to you?"

"Because I wish to study all the points of your character, my Gabriel," was the ready response; "and there are no better means than by thus pursuing a thread of explanations connected with the tender passion. I now perceive, therefore, that you are fervently devoted to Miss Pauline Clarendon, and that you would have remained faithful to her image had she not outraged you by her unfounded suspicions. I even see that rather than trust entirely to your own strength of mind in your late course of allegiance to that lady, you adopted the prudential plan of destroying the garment which might even at the last moment have proved an irresistible temptation. Think you, then, my dear Gabriel, that I am unmindful of all the truths which these little incidents teach me concerning your character? No: I shall treasure them up—I shall ponder upon them—and they will instruct me how to know you better and understand you thoroughly in the long run. And now answer me one question which, being so very trivial, I must candidly attribute to its right source—indeed, to no loftier feeling than a mere passing sentiment of curiosity."

"Speak, lady—put your question and I will answer it, if possible," said the young nobleman.

"Are you certain that the blue domino was destroyed?" inquired the lady. "Do you feel quite convinced that the servant to whom you entrusted the commission, performed it faithfully?"

"I am morally certain that such was the case," returned Florimel: "but I cannot undertake to affirm that the point is beyond all doubt. At the same time I recollect full well that I ordered my black page—a new dependant recently introduced into my service—to destroy the blue domino; and he could have no possible object in disobeying my orders. But surely some motive more important than a transitory curiosity, has dictated these questions?"

"No—I can assure you, my dear Gabriel——"

At this moment the carriage stopped;—and the lady, hastily throwing a scarf over Florimel's head, tied it round his neck in such a manner that it could not possibly shift, much less come off, of its own accord.

"You mean me to accompany you, then, dearest, to the boudoir of darkness, love and mystery?" he murmured in a tone tremulous with varied feelings,—the hope of pleasure struggling against a sentiment of remorse—the consciousness of approaching elysium warring with the pangs which a sense of the deepest perfidy towards Pauline excited in his soul.

"Yes—I mean to introdnce you thither once more," answered the lady, in her soft dulcet tones: "that is to say, if you be agreeable to accompany me," she added, with a sudden accent of restraint.

"Oh! do not doubt it, my charming and adorable friend," exclaimed Florimel. "The net has ensnared me—I am a prey to the most irresistible of fascinations—the spell of the enchantress is upon me—and I yield, I yield! Alas, poor Pauline!" he murmured, his voice suddenly sinking to an inaudible note as these last words were thrown up from his very heart, despite of himself.

At this instant the door of the vehicle was opened by the tall footman—and the lady, having covered her own face with a thick black veil, assisted Lord Florimel to alight. She then unfastened a door in a garden-wall; and while the footman, having shut up the carriage again, was re-ascending to his seat behind, Rao slipped from underneath the vehicle and glided rapidly and noiselessly as a snake into the shade of that garden-wall. The vehicle drove quickly away: while the lady and Lord Florimel passed into the garden, the former stopping for an instant to fasten the door behind them.

As a matter of course Rao was unable to follow through that means of ingress to the enclosure. But he unhesitatingly clambered up the wall the moment the garden-door was closed;—and in the twinkling of an eye he stood upon the other side. Then, cautiously and noiselessly threading his way amongst the maze of evergreens which thronged the grounds and thus favoured his progress, he was enabled by the partial moonlight to keep in view his master and the lady as they proceeded along a gravel-walk, the latter holding the former by the hand and acting as guide.

Little leisure had Rao to contemplate the building which stood in the midst of the grounds whither he had thus audaciously introduced himself: for in about a couple of minutes the lady and Florimel paused at a low door belonging to that spacious edifice.

At this moment a cloud suddenly obscured the moon—throwing all that portion of the building into the deepest shade. With a boldness equalled only by the readiness of wit and the presence of mind that prompted the proceeding, Rao glided forward—crept rapidly and noiselessly along the wall—and reached the immediate vicinity of the low door just at the instant that the lady opened it.

"Now give me your hand once more, Gabriel," said the Unknown; "and I will lead you to that chamber which you yourself have denominated as the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery."

Rao failed not to catch this observation: indeed, he was standing close by the lady as she uttered it—and the word "darkness," as applied to the boudoir, instantaneously confirmed him in the design which he had already formed and which he was indeed now waiting to carry into execution. This was nothing less than to follow the lady and the nobleman to the very end and issue of their adventure; and when he heard enough to satisfy him that the chamber whither they were about to repair was veiled in darkness, he was more resolute than ever in making the attempt already conceived.

The opportunity was at hand! For the door stood open—all was dark within—and the lady had turned round towards Florimel as she addressed to him the observation last chronicled. The moon was totally concealed at that moment—the young noble was blindfolded—and over the countenance of the lady herself did a black veil hang, thus deepening even for her the obscurity which wrapt all things beneath the overhanging wall of the edifice. Every circumstance was therefore favourable at that particular instant for Rao's scheme;—and, with the serpent-like property of rapid and noiseless gliding which seemed peculiar to him, the sable youth slid in a stooping posture over the

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threshold, into the building. His arms were immediately thrown out and swept cautiously around: and his hands encountered first the massive balusters of an antique staircase — then the steps themselves, covered with a thick carpetting. To ascertain these points was the work of one moment: to stand aside, gather himself up into the smallest compass, and hold his very breath while the lady and Florimel passed him by, were the incidents of the next moment.

The unknown paused to close and fasten the door; and she then conducted Florimel up the staircase. Rao followed—the pitchy darkness favouring his design, and the thick carpet of the stairs adding to the security of his tread. With his hands he felt his way: and keen as the scent of an Indian on the trail of an enemy, did he maintain between those whom he was following and himself a distance precisely suitable to his purpose, —neither approaching too near so as to incur the chance of running upon their heels, nor yet getting so far in the rear as to be unable to catch them up in time to enter the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery, along with them.

And this latter aim was accomplished! Yes—no sooner did the unknown lady and Florimel stop short in the passage to which the stairs led, than Rao was on all fours at their very feet;—then, the instant that the door was thrown open, the sable page glided in so stealthily—so silently—so speedily, that no spectre could have passed by more imperceptibly;—and thus ere the door was even closed again and secured within, the lithe and subtle Rao was ensconsed behind the heavy window-curtains of that chamber *where the atmosphere was warm and perfumed!*

CHAPTER CLXI.

HORROR!

We must break off the thread of our narrative for a short space, while we record an episode of horror that characterised the same night, and the same hour of the night, as the incidents contained in the preceding chapter.

For it was while the dark-coloured barouche was yet rolling along from Hyde Park towards its place of destination, that a man was advancing stealthily down a narrow lane skirting one of the churchyards on the northern suburb of London.

This man was roughly dressed in the garb of a sailor: but the broad brim of his hat shaded a countenance the expression of which no mortal language can properly delineate. That countenance was ghastly pale: but the eyes were wild and bloodshot—the lips were cracked and bleeding, as if with a horrible thirst—and the workings of the features were of a nature that seemed to denote an awful struggle in the mind between a poignant anguish and an infernal ferocity. Agony and horror were combined in that dread expression which was stamped upon the man's ghastly countenance;—and as every step brought him nearer and nearer to the gate of the churchyard, his anguish seemed to grow more intense—his horror more profound,—and the tempest which raged in his soul, became the more excruciating — the more awful in its violence—the more tremendous in its absorbing potency.

It seemed as if the irresistible hand of some infernal destiny was hurrying the wretch along to the performance of a task whence his soul, appalled and horror-stricken, shrank with a fearful loathing. That agony which convulsed his countenance and which bathed him in perspiration, was the awful index of a frightful struggle waged by his mind against the doom that he was thus obeying: it was the better nature of the man battling with the hellish instincts of the fiend.

Under the rough jacket which hung loosely upon him, the man carried a spade. Once or twice he paused in the midst of the lane—tossed the implement away from him with a movement of the deepest disgust—and then appeared to experience a feeling of satisfaction at having thus rid himself of a thing which he evidently regarded with as much horror and aversion as if it were a coiling, writhing, clammy serpent.

But scarcely had he cast the shovel away, when his destiny seized upon him again—grasped him as with an invisible hand of iron—forced him to stoop down and pick up the implement once more—and then hurried him along the lane, despite of every wild, desperate, maddening effort which the man made to throw off the thraldom that some supernal and indomitable influence thus exercised over him.

The moon was shining faintly and feebly;—and on reaching the churchyard gate, the man paused. He leant against the railing—he buried his face in his hands—he wept bitterly, bitterly. Profound sobs convulsed him—as if the very fountains of his heart's agony were completely broken up;—and the strong muscular form of that man writhed like a stricken reptile beneath the invisible influence that had fastened its accursed spell upon him!

Yes—the moon was shining faintly and feebly; and the tombs in the churchyard wore a ghastly aspect. Grey in the sickly gleaming appeared the old church itself—the windows shining with a leaden dimness; and deep was the shade in the arched entrance and in the angles and nooks formed by the projecting buttresses. So black and dark, too, were the intervals between the tombstones in the cemetery, that it seemed as if every one was a yawning abyss which had opened, and that the entire churchyard was an assemblage of innumerable gulfs the edges whereof were pinnacled with the monuments of the dead.

And solemn—profoundly solemn was the silence which reigned in that place. The stillness was indeed that of death; and the night air was fraught with the icy coldness of the tomb. 'Twas a silence only too well calculated to enhance the desolation of heart experienced by any homeless outcast and wandering wretch who might happen to pause for a moment there to lean against the gate and rest his weary limbs;—and it was a chill that could not fail to pierce into the very marrow of his bones.

And over the gate bent the man whom a hideous destiny seemed to have impelled thither:—over the gate he bent, looking round upon the churchyard with eyes the haggard wildness and despairing frenzy of which were further proofs of the poignant anguish that wrung his soul. He clung to the gate—and yet he would have been overjoyed to hasten away: with an iron tenacity did he seem to grasp those railings—and yet he would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to be enabled to throw off the spell that was upon him and flee with precipitation from that spot! But he was not his own master: his better inclinations urged him in one direction—his ferocious instincts impelled him in another;—the intelligence of the man was warring against the unnatural sensation of the fiend;—and the latter influence was triumphant!

Yes—a spell of a tremendous and appalling nature was now upon the unhappy man;—and, with convulsing limbs—a form bathed from head to foot in the sweat of his agony—eyes glaring with ferocious wildness—features working horribly—and foam oozing from the tongue and speckled with the blood that came from the cracked lips,—in this wretched, unnatural, awful plight it was that the man suddenly climbed the gate and leapt over into the churchyard.

And now, instead of either keeping in the path or striking off into the intervals between the tombs and the graves, the man studiously avoided touching the ground at all with his feet: but he walked from stone to stone—stepping easily from one to another when they were close, and leaping the intervening space with a sure foot and an unerring dexterity when they were farther apart. From time to time he paused and listened: then, if the sound of a footstep in the lane happened to meet his ear, he would throw himself flat upon some monumental stone and there lie until all was still again. But if it were the barking of a dog which his ear caught, a frightful trembling would come over him as he flung his form on the nearest horizontal stone;—and there would he lie in convulsive writhings until the menacing sound was heard no more!

In all and every case, however, was he careful to avoid touching the ground with his feet. From

tomb to tomb—from stone to stone, would he pass or leap with celerity: but such was his evident horror of even suffering his foot to brush against a blade of the grass that grew between the graves, that if ever he happened to stumble while thus strangely making his way through the churchyard, an ejaculation of fright would escape his lips and his whole frame would tremble with a mortal terror.

And all this time the man hugged the spade beneath the rough garment which he wore. But if now and then he fancied that amidst the twilight gloom he beheld a human shape gliding stealthily along in the shade of the wall or through the labyrinth of the tombs,—or if his disordered imagination deluded him with the idea that a head was suddenly thrust up from behind one of the perpendicular stones,—then how every nerve and fibre in the frame of the unhappy wretch thrilled with excruciating apprehension—how every vein tingled with the blood that suddenly ran like lightning there, but only to flow cold and icy to the heart!

But had this man any fixed purpose in thus wandering over the graves, making the memorials of the dead his stepping-stones and carefully avoiding the cold clay which covered the coffins or lay between the resting-places of perished humanity? And in thus pursuing his path, had he any definite spot in view?—was there any special destination which he was endeavouring to reach?

We know not. Certain, however, it is that all on a sudden the man paused—not on account of any sound filling him with terror or making him anxious to escape observation—but in apparent obedience to some instinctive feeling telling him that *this was the place*, or under the guidance of some spell that made him halt by its own mystic influence in the same way that it at other times urged him on.

And the spot where the man had thus halted was where the mound of a newly-made grave appeared. The large lumps of damp clay were heaped rudely and negligently up: no trouble had been bestowed upon shaping the grave—no turf had been set over the elevation which marked the resting-place of a new victim to the maw of all-destroying Death. Ah! doubtless it was some poor, friendless creature—male or female—that had been buried there;—and the sexton's fee was too small to induce him to bestow any care upon a task for which he was so indifferently remunerated!

This grave lay near a flat tombstone;—and kneeling upon the latter, the man felt carefully—slowly—and cautiously all round and about that newly-made grave. To this portion of his task did he devote upwards of five minutes,—not contenting himself with merely passing his hand everywhere *near* and *over* the grave, but likewise examining the spot with keen and penetrating looks.

At length his finger encountered some object from which his touch recoiled at first, while a cold tremor passed over his frame and the perspiration burst forth once more upon his brow: but, speedily recovering his presence of mind, he again felt cautiously ,and delicately for that object which his finger had ere now encountered. Again he touched it—he raised it gently up: it was only a wire which stretched over that spot, and which passed through the roughly piled mound of damp clay that marked the new-made grave.

Yes—it was only a wire: but how delicately—how cautiously—how timidly did the man touch it. Simply raising it half an inch from the ground—neither pulling it one way nor the other—equally careful not to shake it, he suffered it to lie over the finger which he had thrust underneath it. Then, taking a pair of scissors from his pocket, he cut the wire in twain: and the moment this was done, he appeared to breathe more freely.

Following the course of the wire in one direction from the point where it was cut, the man clipped it asunder again at a distance of about three yards;—and then, following the wire in the other direction, he treated it in a similar manner. Thus the pieces of wire that now remained in the vicinity of the grave, were isolated from the rest; and the man, tearing them up without fear, twisted them round his hand into a skein or ball, and hurled them to a distance.

And now, as if seized with a sudden paroxysm of activity, he grasped his spade and began to dig at the grave as if he had a particular task to perform in a given time, life or death depending upon the issue. And to the accomplishment of this labour did the spell-struck mortal strain his whole nerve and fibre,—dashing the spade down deep into the soil—tossing up the huge lumps with a marvellous speed,—in fine, hollowing out the grave much more speedily than a practised sexton could possibly have done it.

The perspiration poured off him like large drops of rain: the glow of heat into which the toil threw him, appeared to animate him with increased ardour,—heightening into a perfect fever of the blood, and expanding into a delirium of the brain. Madly, madly did he ply the spade: his efforts were almost superhuman. Never was implement worked with such marvellous rapidity—never was grave hollowed out with such wondrous speed. A horrible enthusiasm seemed to be inspiring the wretch in his loathsome work: he grew joyous—happy—intoxicated with triumph;—and the nearer his labour brought him to the end of his task, the more delirious became his feelings—the more maddening the excitement of his soul.

At length the spade struck upon the coffin;—and an ejaculation of frenzied ecstacy burst from the man's lips, as if that dull, hollow, sinister sound had just made the most delicious music to his ears. Through the deep obscurity that prevailed in the depth of the grave, his eyes shone with the ferocious and lurid glare of a tiger crouched in a cavern or concealed in a jungle;—and as those terrible looks flashed through the gloom, they might have been taken for corpse-lights shedding their ominous beams over the spot where a hideous desecration was in progress.

The spade had speedily cleared away all the soil which lay upon the lid of the coffin; and now the man addressed himself to the task of raising the coffin itself. This was speedily accomplished: for the wretch's arms appeared to be made of iron—capable of dashing aside any obstacle—competent to the performance of every task. Soon therefore was the coffin raised to a perpendicular position in the grave: and when once it was thus lifted up on one end, the man had no trouble in dragging it forth from the grave.

Surely it was a giant's arm that thus handled the coffin as if it were a thing of no weight!—or else, surely some fiend must have lent his power to that wretch whose mischief or whose vengeance, whose malignity or whose avarice, was now about to be gratified by the complete desecration of the dead's last home!

For at a moment when the moon was shining more brightly than it had hitherto done this night,—when the stillness was more solemn around,—and when the old church stood out in a finer relief against the deep inky sky beyond,—at this moment was it that the man tore off the lid of the coffin which he had exhumed.

And this portion of his task caused but little trouble: for it was a poor, miserable coffin—a paltry box of thin deal boards hurriedly nailed together and daubed over with a single coat of black paint. For a moment the man seemed disappointed, and half inclined to throw back the coffin into the grave and cover it with the soil again: but this hesitation vanished almost immediately—and the diabolical instinct which impelled the wretch, once more became dominant.

Away went the lid, then—the shroud was torn aside—and the rays of the moon shone out with all their power at that moment upon the countenance of the corpse.

But, O God! what a hideous ejaculation burst from the lips of the man as his eyes fell upon the marble features thus exposed to view. Staggering back, he was on the point of falling into the grave beneath the weight of the sudden consternation which had seized upon him: but, with a new and desperate impulse, he sprang forward—he fell upon his knees by the side of the coffin—he steadied himself so as to contemplate the countenance of the corpse with an earnest scrutiny—and thus did he remain, the living looking into the face of the dead, for upwards of a minute.

And in the space of that minute what varied thoughts flashed through the brain of the monster-man,—appalling fears lest the suspicion which had struck him should prove correct—wild hopes that imagination had deceived him,—then a horrible anxiety to receive a confirmation of these hopes, or else to know the worst,—until at length he could neither hope nor doubt any longer: for the suspicion *was* confirmed—the features were *those* which they had struck him to be—the marble countenance, so serene in death, was the same which he had loved and caressed in life.

Then, with a wild shriek and an unearthly yell, did the wretch spring from his knees: then, with another and still more rending outburst of mortal anguish, did he throw up his arms in mingled horror and despair;—and, as it was precisely at this moment that the moon became all on a sudden obscured with a cloud, the miserable man fancied that the darkness of hell was closing in upon him—and, with a long hideous moan, he sank down on his knees again.

His hands were clasped—but his arms hung down like those of the dead. Not a moan—not a sigh now escaped his lips. He was motionless—speechless. But thoughts of appalling contexture were filling his brain with harrowing sensations, as if scorpions were revelling there. Unnerved and physically paralysed was he by the fearfulness of the scene in which he was playing one part and the dead another, with the spectral churchyard as the theatre of the infernal drama!

His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth with a deadly thirst: and a mortal terror now seized upon him as the night put forth all its inky blackness to veil both moon and stars and draw its sable curtain down unto the very lowest confines of the horizon. Slowly did a sense of approaching lethargy steal upon him: his form, as he knelt on the humid soil, gave way gradually like an image of snow which is melting at the base;—and he eventually sank down by the side of the coffin, deprived of consciousness and lost to every earthly feeling!

An hour elapsed, during which this mysterious swoon lasted—the entranced living slumbering by the side of the irrevocably departed dead!

Suddenly the man awoke—and as suddenly he started up. Springing to his feet, he threw wild and horrified looks around. The moon and stars were now shining forth once more,—shining upon the church, the tombs, and the marble countenance of the corpse! Thus was the wretch enabled to discover where he was: and that discovery itself was a mingled agony and terror.

In the space of a single moment—a moment which carried a myriad incidents through his brain as a rocket with all its out-shooting sparks and countless coruscations sweeps through the air,—in that brief space, we say, did he live over again with a frightfully vivid distinctness every incident and every thought of the tremendous sacrilege which he had ere now achieved towards the resting-place of the dead!

Yes—and amidst those horrifying reminiscences which thus swept through his brain, was *one* which rent him anew with unspeakable agony—which concentrated in itself all the anguish of the rack and the most fiendish implements of the torture-rooms of old—and which made him bend, and writhe, and convulse as if he were flayed alive!

Then, as this intolerable anguish at length found means of giving expression to itself in words, he sank down once more upon his knees by the side of the coffin, exclaiming—"My wife! my wife!"

And he burst into a flood of the bitterest weeping.

Yes: it was his wife—his own wife—whom the monster-man had thus exhumed,—that wife of whose death he was ignorant—whom he had hoped to meet again in the land of the living—but whom he had thus encountered face to face in the cold damp realm of the dead!

Those tears relieved him. The nature which had been changed by awful influences into a demon-like ferocity, was softened: the disposition which no ordinary causes had converted into a morbid and loathsome brutality, was touched. Over the coffin he threw himself—upon the marble features of the dead he printed his caresses and dropped his tears;—and the kisses were burning with the memory of ancient love, and the tears were scalding with the anguish and woe of the present moment.

And, O cruel contrast!—cold, cold as the grave whence that stiff, stark form had been snatched, was the countenance whereon those kisses were fastened and those tear-drops rained down;—and the man murmured, as he paused and gazed steadfastly on the features of the corpse, "Thou didst perish through starvation! Yes—it is too apparent—for thy cheeks must have been fleshless and

sunken even before death laid his finger upon them! And moreover this is a pauper's coffin: there's no possibility of mistaking about *that!* Even into the grave does Misery pursue its victim!"

The man stopped and remained silent for upwards of a minute, during which he still kept his eyes fixed upon the countenance of the dead.

"But thou shalt be revenged, my poor murdered wife," he resumed at length. "Yes—the atrocious system under which the poor of this country live and die, hath murdered thee! Thou art one of the myriad million victims whom that system hath already sent, starved or broken-hearted, to untimely graves. Oh! curses—curses—hell's curses upon such a system! But thou shalt be revenged, I repeat—yes, by the living God! thou shalt be revenged! For I will prove a terror to society—to *that* society whose system has driven me to despair. The deity made me a man: 'tis the world which has made me a monster. And a monster will I remain—performing the deeds of one—carrying horror into the bosom of this society whose outcast I am—striking terror into the soul of that community which cherishes a few favoured ones so fondly and leaves the millions to starve—to rot—to die! And our little ones—Oh! I will seek them out—I will find them," exclaimed the man, continuing to apostrophise the corpse in a tone of concentrated wildness mingled with a savage triumph. "It will not be a difficult task: either grovelling in the workhouse—or perishing on a door-step—or crouched up in a street-corner—or else perhaps in a felon's goal, shall I find them! Yes—those are the places for the outcast working-man to look for his lost children," continued the unhappy being, his voice now expressing a penetrating bitterness: "those are the receptacles into which English civilization thrusts the innocent, unoffending, famishing babes of the poor! O God—how long shall this system last?—how long—how long?"

And covering his face with his hands as he knelt by the side of the coffin, the doomed wretch remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in the profoundest reverie.

Suddenly he started up. A last kiss he imprinted upon the countenance of the corpse—a last tear he dropped—and a last look threw on the marble features: then, as if hurried along by a frantic desire to restore the coffin to its place and the grave to its propriety with all possible despatch, he addressed himself to the task with all his zeal and all his energy.

Carefully however did he resign that pauper-coffin to its last home: and when it was once more lodged at the bottom of the grave, he threw back the earth with an incredible quickness. In half-an-hour the labour was completed—the rising mound of the grave was remodelled with care—and the man, shouldering his spade, looked grimly around him.

No human form was visible—no eyes met his own. The silver light of the moon and stars was now shining serenely—*too* serenely for such a world of oppression, injustice, turpitude, and woe!

Once more mounting upon the tombstones, the monster-man took his departure from the churchyard in the same way that he had entered it;—and on gaining the lane in safety, he appeared to breathe with a comparative ease and freedom that he had not known for some hours past.

We shall not accompany him farther upon the present occasion; neither shall we inquire whither he himself is going—nor who he is—nor how he came to be the victim of so appalling a doom as that which hurried him on to the hideous proceedings of this dread night of churchyard desecration! No—we shall not now stop to examine into all this: but the reader may rest assured that he will soon fall in with this strange and terrible being once more—and then perhaps——

——But let us not anticipate aught of the horrors which we may be called upon to reveal concerning the monster-man.

CHAPTER CLXII.

LORD FLORIMEL AND THE UNKNOWN SYREN.

RETURN we now to the boudoir of love, darkness, and mystery,—that chamber with the perfumed atmosphere, the genial warmth, and the luxurious furniture, to which Florimel was thus introduced a second time.

The sable page, be it remembered, was concealed in that room—his presence being utterly unsuspected and undreamt of on the part of his noble master and that lady whose wantonness had recourse to such strange expedients in order to blend self-gratification with safety.

And upon the sofa which stood near the table, was this impassioned woman reclining in the arms of her paramour of a few hours;—and, although his eyes were unable to penetrate through the Cimmerian darkness of that chamber, yet did his fancy—his ardent, glowing, and fervid fancy—depict all the charms of his companion, as, now half-naked, and intoxicated with love, she pressed her voluptuous form against his own. With the eager eyes of his imagination he sought as it were to trace her entire person through the darkness,—to finish that exciting picture of which his sensations already furnished him with so many delicious particulars,—until his impassioned fancy could conceive all that was tempting and overpoweringly seductive in the contours of that fine person which was abandoned so completely to his embrace. He saw her, then, with his mental vision,—he saw her, with the burning looks of his imagination,—half-divested of her apparel—glowing as a Bacchanal, and amorous as a Bayadere—her long, glossy, silken hair flowing over the shoulders of such fluid shape and so plump and warm to the touch—her eyes half closing, her cheeks flushing, and her lips moist and red as they bestowed and received devouring caresses—her bosom heaving, with protracted sighs of pleasure, like the long slow swell of the ocean after a storm—her white arms thrown up and embracing his neck, with the hands joined behind his head—and her whole person yielding to the delicious langour and the sensuous abandonment of the ardours of love!

All this did the young nobleman fancy—or rather, in this manner did his imagination enable him to complete the glowing picture of what he already felt or knew. But in reality he could see not that woman who even in the darkness was able to assert the power of a fascination superior to even the most lascivious looks: but he could feel her splendid form as it vibrated to his pressure—

his hand could wander freely over all its rich contours—and the effect was the same as if from her person there exhaled a fragrance which stole upon the senses with the influence of a delicious inebriation. Oh! irresistible indeed was the power of that intoxicating perfume: and the image of Pauline was as compietely drowned in the cup of ambrosia of which he was now drinking so deeply, as ever the memory of the bacchanalian reveller was steeped in the oblivion of the brimming bowl.

And all this time, shrouded in the same impenetrable darkness which veiled the Unknown Lady from the eyes of her paramour, was Rao concealed in the boudoir of love and mystery!

"Dearest Gabriel," said the mistress of that voluptuous retreat, at length breaking a silence which had lasted for a considerable time, but during which the amorous dalliance had not ceased,—"dearest Gabriel, you know that I love you—otherwise I should not have sought this second interview with you. Tell me, Gabriel—do you think that I love you?"

"Yes, dearest lady—I am certain that you must have an affection for me," responded the young nobleman, upon whose lips the ardour of her caresses yet seemed to glow and in whose veins the transfusion of her own impassioned feelings was yet burning.

"It is indeed true, my Gabriel, that I love you," said the Unknown, in the deepest pathos, and most moving tones of her fluid voice: "and it is because I love you that I am anxious to afford you any proof of this affection—any proof, I mean, that lies within my power."

"You are kind-hearted and generous, my sweet friend," said Florimel: "but the only favour you can possibly show me is the disclosure of your name and the revelation of your countenance."

"Not now—not now," exclaimed the lady, lavishing upon her paramour the tenderest caresses as if for the purpose of coaxing him away from a topic which displeased her. "But the time may not be far distant when I shall be enabled to place that amount of confidence in you, Gabriel——"

"Ah! think not, my beautiful companion," interrupted the young nobleman, "that I am influenced by any sentiment of idle curiosity. No: I should not have made the slightest allusion to the avowal of your name, had I reflected for another moment—because it is only your countenance which I wish revealed. I care not who you may be: for I am confident that you are handsome—splendidly handsome! Oh! such frenetic passions as these which burn in your bosom can only be associated with a loveliness well adapted to inspire the same in return!"

"You shall gaze upon my countenance soon, Gabriel—you shall know who I am—you shall become the depositor of all my secrets in due time," murmured the mysterious syren, as she pressed herself more closely to her noble paramour. "But in the meantime tell me if there be anything which I can do to testify my love towards you and rivet your friendship—if it be impossible to win *your* love in return! Tell me, Gabriel, whether my fortune can serve you: for I am rich—very rich—and cheerfully would I place a large portion of my wealth at your disposal."

"Generous-hearted friend—as liberal as you are loving," said the young nobleman, straining her the more closely to his breast,—"I return you a thousand thanks for your proposals: but I have no need to avail myself of them. For I also am rich, as perhaps you are aware—indeed you must be, since you are more or less acquainted with me——"

"Ah! my beloved Gabriel," murmured the lady, in a tone trembling with emotion,—"I know that you are rich now; but is not your fortune menaced?—is not your position threatened?"

Florimel started with a convulsive paroxysm as the lady breathed those questions in his ears: for who could she possibly be, that she was thus intimate with his most private affairs?—who was she, that the important secrets of his present position were so fully known to her?

"How learnt you these circumstances?" he demanded, after a long pause and in a voice which was ominously changed.

"Do not question me upon that head, Gabriel," said the lady. "Even were you to know who I am, you would not glean from such knowledge the source of my present information concerning the posture of your affairs. And if I have ere now alluded to them, it is because I love you, Gabriel—because I feel deeply, deeply interested in all that concerns you—and because I may perhaps be enabled to render you a service in this matter."

"Oh! how mysterious art thou, incomprehensible being!" exclaimed the young nobleman: then, bending his face down to her own, he covered the warm cheeks and the moist lips with devouring kisses. "Surely thou art some creature of a grade superior to that of ordinary mortals," he murmured, in a tone of mingled compliment and gratitude: "perhaps some fairy who hath taken a fancy to so humble an individual as myself?—perhaps some demi-goddess, descended from your empyrean throne to teach the pleasures of paradise to an earthly lover! Oh! my unknown charmer—my mysterious friend,—comprehensible in nothing save the transcendent witchery of thy seductiveness and the irresistible allurement of thy fascinations,—how wonderfully is my spirit drawn towards thee by gratitude—by admiration—by a sense of elysian enjoyment—almost by a feeling of love!"

But as Florimel suffered these last words to fall murmuringly from his lips, his heart smote him with a severe and poignant pang: for the image of Pauline was instantaneously conjured up to his mental view. And in order to flee away as it were from the deeply mournful looks of silent reproach which the image of that fair being appeared to be fixing upon him, the faithless Florimel wound his arms still more completely around the half-naked form of the Unknown Lady;—and plunging as it were into the absorbing tide of the continuous and almost frenzied caresses which she now lavished upon him, he forgot Pauline—he forgot his vows, his pledges, his grief at her late conduct, and all,—everything did he forget, while abandoning himself to the transports of the present occasion!

"Thou art adorable, dearest lady," murmured Florimel, after a long pause. "Oh! promise me that we shall meet soon again! But whereforc should we separate at all? Surely you must be your own mistress as I am my own master," continued the young noble, hurried along by the infatuation excited by all the influences which were now operating upon his susceptible nature,—the sense of ineffable enjoyment—the mystery which enveloped

alike the companion and the place of his pleasures —the relief which his feelings, wounded as they were by the conduct of Pauline, now experienced in the dulcet society of his amorous Unknown—and the generous proposals which she had made to place her fortune at his command.

"What do you mean, Gabriel?" she inquired, in a low tone that was still trembling with sensations of bliss mellowed into a voluptuous languor. "Supposing that you *were* your own master, which you are *not*—and supposing that I avowed myself my own mistress, as I really am,—then what would you have me infer?"

"Before I answer you, mysterious being," said the young nobleman, "tell me wherefore I am not my own master."

"Because you love Pauline Clarendon," responded the lady with something like the bitterness of a jealous rivalry in her tone: "and you confessed that much to me ere now, while we were journeying hither in the carriage."

"But you are charming enough, as I am confident you are sufficiently handsome also, to wean the least fickle heart from the object of its adoration elsewhere," murmured Lord Florimel, scarcely knowing what he said, so intoxicated was he with the feelings of bliss that enwrapt all his senses, and so completely was he enthralled by the magic of the seductiveness and the luscious wantonness of the caresses which were brought to bear upon him.

"Then do you mean to assure me that it is possible you can ever forget Pauline Clarendon and transfer your love to me?" asked the Unknown, with the breathless anxiety of suspense in her musical voice—while at the same time Florimel felt her heart palpitate rapidly and violently beneath the glowing bosom which he was pressing.

"By heaven! I am almost tempted to swear that I love thee already," exclaimed Florimel. "Oh! if I could only see thy countenance, and if it should prove as handsome as I have in imagination depicted it,—then, oh! then thy triumph would be indeed complete—thy victory would be accomplished, irresistible syren that thou art!"

"I will *not* reveal my countenance to thee yet, Gabriel," was the response, delivered in a mild but firm tone. "Nevertheless, I can assure thee that it is handsome—very handsome—as handsome as thou thyself hast imagined it to be! There—even now as thy hand playeth caressingly with my hair, thou canst feel that it is long, luxuriant, and glossy. Now pass that hand over my forehead, and thou canst perceive that it is broad, smooth, and as if polished. My cheeks are plump and yet soft;—and thou may'st judge whether they could glow thus warmly, unless the hues of a vigorous health were upon them. Then my teeth—thou canst feel that they are even in nature's arrangement, and perfect in number: not one is deficient—and thou may'st judge whether such teeth must not be of pearly whiteness and spotless purity. And my breath—oh! thou hast already drunk it in as if it were fragrant——"

"Yes—balmy as the breath of May, when the primroses and the violets are appearing," murmured Florimel, lulled as it were into such a voluptuous languor that he would have made no effort to resist the syren even if she had endeavoured to steal from him his immortal soul, were such a theft possible.

"Then you are fully convinced that I must be as beautiful as your imagination has already depicted me?" continued the unknown charmer, whose seductive influence was subtle as a poison circulating rapidly in the veins, and sure as an opiate stealing upon the senses.

"I am confident that thou art as ravishingly beautiful—no, as superbly handsome in countenance," replied the infatuated Florimel, "as thou art magnificent in the Diana-like proportions of thy form. Oh! wherefore hast thou cast thine invisible chains around me, irresistible enchantress that thou art? For even now—despite of a profound sense of duty prompting me to start from thine arms and give back my allegiance to the image of the lovely but capricious Pauline,—yes, despite of that better feeling which stirs within me like a remorse, I am unable to shake off the manacles and the fetters which thou hast rivetted upon me! Well—then—be thou Satan in a woman's shape, or an angel divested for the moment of thy glory,—be thou a fiend sent in disguise to tempt me on to the gulf of perdition, or a heavenly being teaching me the paths of elysian enjoyment,—whichever thou art, thou hast triumphed over me—I am thine—unredeemably thine—body and soul—heart and hand—intellect and sense——Oh! yes, I am thine—I am thine!"

And the young nobleman, who was now worked up to a pitch of frenetic enthusiasm which placed him utterly beyond the mastership of his own thoughts, words, or actions, strained the seductive creature to his breast with all the violence of those impassioned feelings;—and when he experienced all the responsive ardour of her own lascivious nature, he was like a man who, in mingled ecstacy and madness, would leap into a volcano's crater, grapple with a tiger, or perform any other equally rabid or desperate deed at the bidding of a woman's tongue.

"Now, Gabriel," said the Unknown Lady, satisfied that her empire over him was complete, and that this sway was as potent over his mind as over his faculties—as enthralling with regard to the sentiment as it was in respect to the sense,—"and now, Gabriel—my own dearly beloved Gabriel," she resumed, in her deepest, sweetest, most melodious, and most touching tones,—"you have abandoned yourself entirely unto me, body and soul; and I fear that you will repent to-morrow of the rashness with which the pledge has been given?"

"No—by heaven! such will not prove the case!" exclaimed Florimel, almost indignant at the suspicion; and then, such was his infatuation, he broke forth into the most passionate entreaties that the Unknown Lady would repose implicit confidence in him.

"Yes—I do believe you, my Gabriel," she said at length, when the powers of language were exhausted by him in glowing protestations and fervid pledges;—"and now I will ask you what you meant by the question which you put to me ere now, and which demanded wherefore we should separate at all?"

"I meant, dearest lady," replied Florimel, "that either as my mistress or as my wife must you henceforth be the companion of my existence!"

"As your mistress—or as your wife," repeated the lady with the slow deliberation of a musing tone. "Ah! it were more fitting that I should be your mistress, because I am some years older than you: but my pride—my vanity—my reputation—in fine, all other motives urge me to become your wife! Tell me, then, Florimel—tell me, whether you will

marry me—whether you will lead me to the altar and bestow thy name upon me?"

"I will—I will—if it will make thee happy and secure thee altogether to me," exclaimed the young nobleman.

"And in return," said the lady, with a rapid utterance, "I will undertake to save you, Gabriel,—yes—save you from the perils which now threaten you! I will save your fortune—I will save your peerage—and this law-suit, which has already been commenced against you, will I crush in the very bud!"

"My God! who are you, dearest and most incomprehensible of women?" exclaimed the young nobleman, renewed amazement breaking in somewhat upon the infatuation and enthusiasm which the mysterious lady had succeeded in exciting in his soul.

"No matter *at present* who I am," she responded, instantaneously redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and winning him back into the mystic halo and intoxicating influence of her Circean fascinations. "You have declared that you will marry me, Gabriel: but I must give you time to ponder upon this pledge. Nay—I will rather put it in the light of a condition which I stipulate. And that condition is summed up in the words—*Make me your wife, and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank!* But as I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that you will experience towards me *to-morrow* precisely the same rapturous devotion with which you bless, honour, and rejoice me *to-night*,—and as I am well aware, then, that the fulfilment or the refusal of the condition which I have laid down are alternatives which can only be the result of calm deliberation,—I am about to describe to you the means by which you may communicate with me at any time, should you wish to do so."

"And those means," cried Florimel, eagerly. "What are they?"

"A simple intimation to your own solicitor, Mr. Cresswell, that you have made up your mind to propose an amicable settlement of the matter at issue."

"Then you are acquainted with my solicitor?—you must know him—and he must know you?" exclaimed Florimel, once more seized with the wildest surprise. "Nay,—he must even be in communication with you! Or else how could a simple intimation of such a nature as the one you have suggested, reach *your* ears so readily, unless through *him?*"

"Most solemnly do I assure you, Gabriel," responded the lady, her voice showing that she was smiling as she spoke,—"that I am not only altogether unacquainted with Mr. Cresswell, your attorney—but that I have never seen him in my life—at least to my knowledge."

"Then how can anything which I may say to *him* reach your ears," demanded Florimel, more and more bewildered by the turn which the discourse was thus taking.

"Must not such an intimation as I have supposed you to be inclined to make sooner or later—must it not, I ask, be communicated into other channels?" said the lady.

"Ah! I comprehend," cried Florimel. "Yes—truly: an intimation from me that I am anxious to settle matters amicably, must of necessity travel into the enemy's camp. Oh! is it possible, dear lady, that you are in any way connected with my foes?"

"Far from it—they do not know me," was the prompt answer, delivered in a tone of confidence. "But wherefore should you seek to penetrate into my sources of information, since you *must* comprehend by this time that I am a being involved in mystery and shrouded by a veil which the hand of curiosity cannot possibly draw aside until the day, the hour, and the minute shall come when I choose to give my permission. Now rest assured, Gabriel, that I can aid you in your present difficulty—and do not blind yourself to the fact that it is unsurmountable on your part. Your adversary will inevitably triumph if you trust the question to the issue of a law-process: but *you* shall triumph, Gabriel, if you accede to the condition I have laid down. And should you hesitate—which you will do, I am fully aware,—should you remain undecided for even weeks and months—and then in the long run find yourself compelled to fall back upon the succour which I propose to render available on your behalf—in such a case, I say, fear not to appeal to me through the medium I have suggested—imagine not that it has become too late for me to aid you, or that my sentiments towards you have undergone a change. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my beloved and mysterious friend," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Oh! fear not that I shall be long ere I adopt the means and follow the instructions which are to bring us together again—no more to separate!"

"We shall see," murmured the lady, with a half-suppressed sigh: but it was evident that she did not experience the same confidence which the young nobleman entertained with regard to the strength of the impassioned ardour and the permanence of the fervid enthusiasm whereby he was now enthralled. "And now," she suddenly exclaimed, after a brief pause and in a tone of reviving cheerfulness,—"and now, beloved Gabriel, for an hour of bliss and elysian joy in each other's arms and on that couch——"

But her further utterance was drowned in the billing murmurs of the kisses which Lord Florimel fastened upon her lips, and which she gave back with all the intoxicating lubricity of her ripe and luscious mouth.

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A clock, apparently belonging to some adjacent church or chapel, proclaimed the hour of four in the morning,—when the Unknown Lady started from the arms of Florimel, whom she thus abruptly awakened from a dreamy repose which had stolen voluptuously over him.

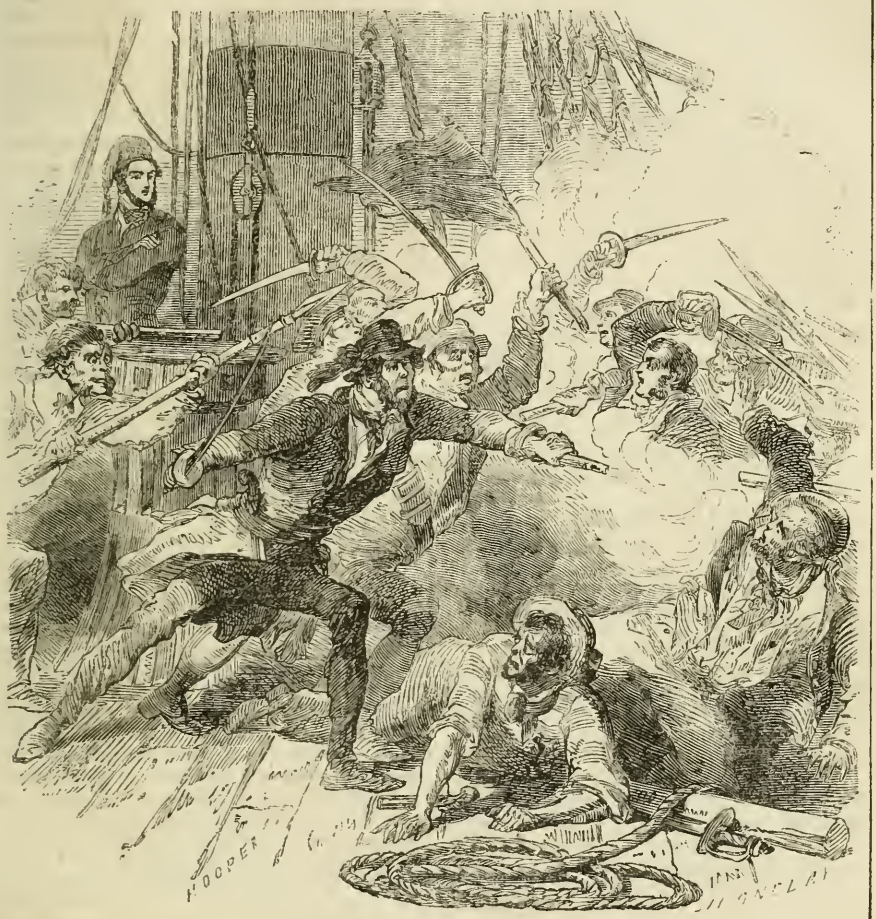
"What! is it time to separate?" he exclaimed.

"Yes: hasten, dear Gabriel—delay not, I beseech thee!" returned the lady.

He immediately complied with her wishes; and in a few minutes they had both resumed their apparel in the utter darkness which continued to pervade that boudoir of love, of mystery, and of a perfumed atmosphere.

"And now, by beloved Gabriel, thou wilt submit to the precaution which is so imperatively necessary?" said the Unknown, throwing into her voice all the winning charm and seductiveness of her melodious intonations.

"Yes—cheerfully do I submit to anything which inspires thee with confidence in me," returned the young nobleman, upon whose senses and faculties the



influence of a profound infatuation and an engrossing rapture was still maintaining its empire.

The lady murmured some endearing words, while she carefully fastened a silk handkerchief over Florimel's eyes: then, giving him his hat, she led him from the room. The door she left open behind her; and thus Rao experienced no difficulty in following close behind—for the passage and the staircase were still involved in a darkness deep as that which fell upon Egypt.

The door at the foot of the staircase was thrown open by the lady, who hurried Florimel along without pausing to close it;—and the sable page therefore found every facility offered for his escape. But it was now of the utmost importance to him to reach Piccadilly *before* his master—so that, in case Florimel should inquire for him when arriving at home, he might not be missed. Accordingly, while the Unknown Lady was conducting her noble paramour along the gravel-walk, Rao plunged rapidly but noiselessly amidst the evergreens the position of which was dimly shadowed forth in the misty obscurity that had succeeded the light of moon and stars. In a few moments he gained the garden-wall, which he climbed with the agility of a cat;—and thus, favoured by the deep gloom, he fled unobserved from the vicinage of the place where he had listened to a discourse which had amazed him profoundly and to sighs of pleasure which had excited him strangely.

But he did not quit the neighbourhood of that mansion without having paused for a minute to study its salient features as well as the darkness of the morning-hour would permit: and he was enabled to observe *enough* to impress his mind with the positive conviction that he should not fail to recognise the place again.

At a short distance he was lucky enough to overtake a hackney coach, which bore him back to Piccadilly in a little more than a quarter of an

hour;—and he arrived at home a few minutes before the vehicle containing Lord Florimel stopped at the door.

But, to return to that nobleman, we should observe that so soon as the lady had conducted him to the garden gate, she made him pause while she hurriedly repeated to him that condition upon which she was prepared to succour him in crushing his enemies;—and she likewise reiterated the means he was to adopt in order to convey to her his desire to see her again, should he sooner or later resolve upon agreeing to that condition and throwing himself entirely into her arms. Thus upwards of five minutes elapsed while the Unknown Lady was breathing her farewell words in Florimel's ears; and thus also was an opportunity unconsciously afforded to the black page to achieve his successful escape from the mansion and its neighbourhood.

The mysterious syren now pressed Florimel's hands with impassioned fervour to her lips: then, opening the gate, she murmuringly bade him farewell. At the same instant he was raised in the strong arms of the tall footman and thrust into the carriage: the door was banged—and the vehicle started off at a gallop.

Florimel removed the handkerchief from his eyes; and when he tried the windows, he found, as he had expected, that the wooden blinds were drawn up and that they were immoveable. He then threw himself back in the luxurious barouche and gave way to his meditations,—the joyous recollections of the past few hours' pleasure now rapidly mingling with feelings of bitter compunction and poignant remorse as the image of Pauline rose before his mental vision.

At length the barouche stopped—the door was opened—he leapt out—and the equipage was whirled away again with all the rapidity which two superb steeds were capable of exerting.

Florimel paused for a few moments to follow it with his eyes as it rushed glancingly along the rows of lamps which marked, as with a tracery of light, the descending and then ascending thoroughfare stretching away along the margin of one park and towards the entrance of another;—and as the young nobleman stood gazing until the din of its wheels and its horses' hoofs were lost in the distance, he heaved a profound sigh as he thought of the temptations—the irresistible temptations—into which that departing carriage had this night borne him!

The door of his mansion stood open—and Rao was there to receive him

"What! not in bed, my boy?" exclaimed Florimel, surprised to observe that his page was still up and dressed at that late hour—or rather, early hour in the morning.

"I fancied that your lordship might perhaps need my attendance," said the sable youth; in his wonted quiet manner and without the least embarrassment or confusion in his looks.

"You are a good and grateful boy, Rao," said Lord Florimel, passing his hand with a caressing air of approval over the silken jetty hair of the page.

And Rao's slender form trembled in every fibre—quivered in every nerve, at his master's touch;—and beneath the darkness of his skin, the blood glowed in deepest crimson in the flesh of his cheeks, while it boiled in his veins with the fury of some passion profoundly stirred.

"You tremble, Rao—you shiver," said Florimel, in a tone of commiseration. "You are evidently very cold—and this is all through sitting up to wait for me. Poor boy! Another time let the hall-porter perform his duty—nor should you undertake to do it for him."

"Oh! my lord, it has given me a heartfelt pleasure to sit up to-night!" exclaimed the boy, in a thrilling tone.

"You are a good and grateful youth," repeated Florimel; "and I am more than ever rejoiced to think that I received you into my service."

"And each day, my lord, am I more rejoiced to think that I have entered it," returned Rao: but the strange significancy and ominous meaning which formed as it were an under-current in his tone, escaped the notice of Florimel.

"Well—give me my candle—I will dispense with your services to-night—or as I should say, this morning," observed the nobleman. "And now betake yourself to rest, Rao—and another time don't sit up for me unless you like, my boy."

Thus speaking, Lord Florimel hastened to his own chamber, to dream of the Unknown Lady and Pauline—the joys of the mysterious boudoir and his own deep infidelity towards the virgin-object of his purer and holier adoration.

CHAPTER CLXIII.

THE BUCCANEERS.

A MONTH had elapsed since Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated criminal, embarked at Liverpool on board a small vessel bound for New York.

He had quitted England only through dread of the threats which the outraged Earl of Desborough had levelled against him on that tremendous occasion when the incident of the portrait revealed the identity of *Gustavus Wakefield* the sham West-Indian with *Philip Ramsey* the resuscitated of the gallows. On that occasion, as the reader will remember, the almost heart-broken Earl of Desborough had addressed himself in these terms to Ramsey:—"Here are five hundred pounds for your use; and, by the living God! if you venture to remain in England—if you do not proceed in my carriage direct to Liverpool and thence depart without delay for America—I will show you no more mercy, but proclaim the fact of your existence to the world and set the blood-hounds of justice to hunt you to that destruction which you have escaped once."

These words rang in the ears of the wretched criminal throughout the journey from London to Liverpool. They seemed to pursue him like an anathema,—and although he had many and cogent reasons to induce him to remain in England—yes, to remain in the land where he was every instant fearful of being recognised—he nevertheless felt as if a spell were urging him on to the fulfilment of the conditions imposed upon him by the Earl. And thus was it that his terrors ruled him until he stood upon the deck of the *Fire-Fly* schooner at Liverpool;—and it was only when the vessel was putting out to sea that he began to reflect that he perhaps had yielded too much to his alarm in thus suffering the Earl's menaces to drive him into exile!

But it was then too late to amend the step he had taken—too late to retrace his way. He could not quit the vessel, now that she was fairly under weigh like a bird upon the wing;—and he therefore resigned himself to the fate which forced him upon this voyage across the Atlantic — consoling himself, moreover, with the thought which flashed to his mind, *that it would be alike safer and easier to negotiate for his full and complete pardon with those who, he well knew, were able to procure it, and whose influence he could command!*

The vessel in which he had embarked was a schooner: it was small, but a fast-sailer and an excellent sea-boat;—and in the rough weather which was speedily encountered, it fully justified all the praises that the captain was wont to bestow upon his "craft." Fortunately for Ramsey, there was not a soul on board who had ever seen him before the occasion of his embarkation; nor did the remotest shadow of a suspicion exist that he was otherwise than what he professed to be—"Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, a merchant."

A month passed, we say, since the good schooner *Fire-Fly* put out of the Mersey on her voyage to New York. During this interval, as we have likewise observed, she encountered some tempestuous weather: but she weathered it all, though somewhat impeded in her course by the adverse winds with which she had at times to contend. More than two-thirds of the distance were however accomplished by the expiration of the fourth week; and Ramsey had already laid down, in a methodical manner, the various plans which he intended to adopt on his arrival in the States, when an incident occurred which changed his position, his thoughts, and his schemes with a bewildering suddenness.

The extreme beauty of the weather had called Ramsey one morning from his hammock at an earlier hour than usual. He went upon deck as the sun was about to rise in all that splendour which is most irresistibly overpowering alike to the physical view and the mental conception, upon the broad expanse of ocean. Dark clouds of neutral tint covered the heavens, save in the eastern horizon: and there, in the spot whence the orb of day was to beam upon the world, the sky was of a sombre brown.

Reader, you have beheld the gradient flaming up of the red fire upon the stage of a theatre,—how gradually it appears and then rises behind the scenery, until it flames from wing to wing, and from floor to roof, involving the whole place in a blaze of mimic glory. If you have seen this effect of art, gentle reader, when well managed and in a spacious theatre, —then may you form an idea of how the sun, on the morning whereof we are writing, rose behind those sombre brown clouds which lay piled up, mass upon mass and layer upon layer, in the eastern horizon. And first those clouds began to shine dimly, like a far-off conflagration: then, lighting up as if with an internal fire penetrating through them, they exchanged their sombre hues for glorious tints of the richest purple and the most vivid crimson. Soon the edges of the clouds kindled into borders of burnished gold, brightening into fringes of living fire: until the luminous effulgence spread farther and wider over the horizon, and thence rolled itself on and on in a sheet of dissolving light, which gilded at last the entire canopy of heaven!

And now this flood of living gold revealed a vessel in the distance—far a-head of the *Fire-Fly*. Ramsey stood watching her as she seemed to be sailing through the blaze of luminous glory which thus bathed her. Presently the captain of the *Fire-Fly* who had been examining her with his glass for some time, exclaimed in a tone of surprise, that she was "putting about." The mate of the schooner took the telescope in his turn and scrutinised the ship a-head, which was pronounced to be a large brig; and he likewise expressed amazement at the course which she was adopting. Ramsey now ventured to inquire the cause of the astonishment thus inspired by the movements of the stranger-vessel; and he was informed that she must either be distressed for provisions, or else a pirate.

This latter alternative startled the resuscitated criminal; and the captain, observing the mingled alarm and surprise which Ramsey's countenance very naturally denoted, hastened to explain himself more fully.

"You see, Mr. Wakefield," he said, "it isn't right that that vessel should put about unless it wanted to speak with us. Now there can't well be more than two reasons why it should. The fust is, that it's in distress for provisions;—and the second is —that it's a pirate on the look out for any craft smaller than itself."

"And which do you think is the more probable?" asked Ramsey, his tone and manner both indicating a feeling of uneasiness.

The captain rolled his quid over from one side of his mouth to the other—gave a long and solemn stare at Ramsey—hitched up his breeches—and said at length, "Well, sir, since you ax me for the candid truth, I'm blowed if I don't think she's a pirate—'cos she don't put up no colours, and 'cos she looks too taut and neat about her rigging to have anything like famine a-ailin' the crew."

Having thus spoken, the captain proceeded to consult the mate; and the half-dozen sailors forming the rest of the crew of the *Fire-Fly* speedily gathered near the spot where their officers were conversing. The opinion that the stranger-vessel was "no good," became general; and the schooner hoisted all canvass in order to run away from her. But the brig was enabled to bear rapidly down upon her; and when escape was seen to be impossible, the captain of the *Fire-Fly* summoned his crew around him—distributed cutlasses and pistols—and made the following harangue:—

"My friends, you can see as well as I can that there's somethink more than suspicious about that there brig which is dropping down upon us. It may be that she's commanded by some lubber as doesn't know when to haul up his colours so as to show a friendly aspeck; but I'm werry much afeard she'll turn out a wixen. In this case, my friends, we've on'y one dooty to perform—which is to defend the good ship *Fire-Fly* till the werry last. And now, my men, mark me when I say that if this suspicious-looking craft *does* prove a rum customer, I for one will sooner go to Davy Jones's locker than haul down our colours or give up our owners' property to a parcel of buccaneering waggabones."

This speech was loudly applauded by the few brave fellows to whom it was addressed: but Ramsey stood at a distance—moody, silent, and with a sad foreboding in his mind, as he kept his eyes

fixed upon the vessel which was so rapidly and so suspiciously bearing down upon the *Fire-Fly*.

"Don't you mean to lend us a helping hand, Mr. Wakefield?" demanded the captain, as he advanced and proffered a cutlass to Ramsey.

"Most certainly," was the prompt reply given by the resuscitated criminal, as he started from his reverie and seized the weapon which the hardy mariner handed him.

In a few minutes the brig came sufficiently near for the persons on the deck of the *Fire-Fly* to observe certain appearances which were only too well calculated to set at rest any doubts that might have previously existed in respect to the character of that stranger-vessel and the intentions of its crew. For the men on the deck of the brig were all armed to the teeth; and in the bow a ferocious-looking fellow was planted with a grapnel ready to be flung into the rigging of the schooner.

"You perceive, my mates," said the captain of this latter vessel, "that our worst fears are confirmed and that we shall have a fight for it."

"Aye, aye, sir," exclaimed the men thus addressed: "but we ain't a going to give up the *Fire-Fly* without a blow in her defence."

Scarcely had the gallant crew of the trim little schooner given this response, when a man on board the brig was seen to flourish a speaking-trumpet as an indication that he was about to address the captain of the schooner.

"Now, then?" vociferated the latter, interrogatively.

"Haul down your colours—fling your weapons overboard—shorten sail—and send a couple of men on board of us as hostages of good faith on your part," exclaimed the individual with the speaking-trumpet on the deck of the stranger-vessel.

"Who are you?" demanded the captain of the *Fire-Fly*.

"Ask no questions—but do as you're bid," was the imperious response.

"Then we'll resist you as a set of freebooting scoundrels," cried the captain of the schooner: then, turning hastily towards his men, he said, "Treat them to a volley, my fine fellers."

And every pistol was simultaneously fired from the deck of the *Fire-Fly*.

The volley was instantaneously returned by the pirates, who at the same time by a skilful manœuvre ran their brig across the schooner's bows—and the grapnel fastened the two vessels together in a moment.

Then from the deck of the brig did half-a-dozen ruffian-looking fellows, all armed to the teeth, leap on board the schooner; and a terrible conflict ensued between the buccaneers and the gallant defenders of the *Fire-Fly*. But what words can be found to express the astonishment of Philip Ramsey, when he recognised the redoubtable Magsman and the ferocious Beggarman in the leaders of the boarding-party?

Dropping his cutlass in a moment—staggering back towards the mast—with a countenance as pale as death and limbs that trembled convulsively, the resuscitated criminal kept his eyes fixed with a wild vacancy upon the features of the two desperate men who were combatting with irresistible valour at the head of their pirate-followers. Too much occupied to take notice either of Ramsey or of the mingled amazement and terror with which he was regarding them, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman fought as if the fate of the whole world depended upon the issue. Their lion-like courage was worthy of a better cause;—and vainly did the crew of the *Fire-Fly* contend against a boarding-party whose leaders seemed to be endowed with the strength of giants and the fury of demons.

The captain of the schooner was the first who succumbed—self-devoted to that duty which he owed his employers, who, comfortably seated in their counting-house in Liverpool, little thought at the moment how tremendous was the danger which had overtaken their vessel. And now upon the deck thereof flowed rivulets of blood—ghastly wounds were given and received—through the ambient air clanged the din of cutlasses and echoed the sharp crack of pistols—and for upwards of a quarter of an hour the combat raged with a frightful fury. But at the expiration of that time the result was no longer doubtful. The captain of the *Fire-Fly* and two of his best men were slain; and the other four were speedily overpowered. Two perished fighting until the very last: the other two were made prisoners and carried on board the brig, where one died soon afterwards from the wounds he had received. Thus was there but a single survivor of the crew of the *Fire-Fly*—save and except the resuscitated criminal, Philip Ramsey.

It was not until the conflict was over and the schooner was completely in the hands of the buccaneers, that the Magsman and the Big Beggarman observed a tall, slender, genteel-looking man, seated in the stern of the vessel, with his elbows resting upon his knees and his countenance buried in his hands. Naturally presuming that he must be some passenger, who had taken no part in the recent fray, they forthwith accosted him with some words of re-assurance: but when he raised his head and revealed a face which, though ghastly pale, was not to be mistaken in any lineament and could not fail to be recognised in every feature, the two ruffians who had a moment before fought with such desperate valour, shrank back in affright and gave vent to ejaculations of horror.

But neither their words nor their manner were observed at the moment by any of their comrades: for Watkins, Bradley, and the other freebooters were all busily employed in overhauling the stores and cargo of the *Fire-Fly*;—and the eager glance of scrutiny with which Ramsey's eyes swept the deck of the schooner and thence travelled as rapidly and as searchingly to the brig which lay alongside, showed him that the terror with which he had inspired the Magsman and the Beggarman was unnoticed elsewhere.

"My good friends," he accordingly said, in a hoarse, thick voice,—"do not expose me—do not abandon me! I am indeed your old acquaintance——"

"Holy God! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Beggarman, clinging to his companion's arm for support and gazing in mingled horror and consternation upon the pale face of the resuscitated criminal.

"Don't be a fool, Stephen," said the Magsman. "It's a being of real flesh and blood—that's clear. But who are you, sir?" he demanded, fixing his looks with some degree of apprehension, despite the boldness of his words, upon Ramsey's features.

"I am he for whom you take me," answered the wretched being. "A combination of marvellous cir-

cumstances, too long to be related now, have snatched me from death—restored me, indeed, to life—made me a passenger on board this vessel——"

"And you are Philip Ramsey?" interrupted the Magsman, lowering his voice to a whisper as he put the question.

"I am—I am," responded the resuscitated, in a tone of mingled despair and earnest appeal. "But do not expose me to your comrades, I conjure you! Whatever your present avocations may be—whatever your friends may be—I beg and implore that my secret may remain inviolable: for sooner than be taunted with the damnable ordeal through which I have passed, I would rather put an end at once to my wretched existence!"

And the resuscitated criminal pointed over the ship's side to the calm water whereon it floated—as much as to intimate that the means of self-destruction lay within reach of suicidal steps.

"Don't be afraid, my friend—we shan't blab," said the Magsman. "But is it possible, after all, that ——you know what I mean——"

"Yes—is it possible?" echoed the Big Beggarman: and, as he spoke, he ventured to lay his hand upon Ramsey's arm to assure himself it was in truth a being of flesh and blood, and not a ghost, that thus wore the shape and semblance of the Aylesbury banker who had been executed in front of Newgate!

"My God! don't torture me with questions now," exclaimed Ramsey. "I am trembling from head to foot lest any of your comrades should overhear your words or notice your gestures of astonishment. Will you control yourselves?—will you cast off that air of mingled mistrust and wonder?"

"To be sure we will," said the Magsman, seizing Ramsey's hand and giving it a hearty shake;—"to be sure we will—now that we're satisfied of your being what you represent yourself. But, by God! anything more extraordinary than this——"

"I can't believe it yet," observed the Big Beggerman, still surveying Ramsey with the most unfeigned astonishment. "And yet, of course it is as you say——"

"Besides, there's every feature the same," added the Magsman.

"At all events you might as well give us a sign that you're really Philip Ramsey and not some brother of his'n," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, grinning at the lucid idea which he had just propounded as the most satisfactory means for the resuscitated to adopt in order to prove his own identity.

"My God! you will drive me mad," he cried, stamping his foot and clenching his hands with the fury of impatience. "At one moment you believe me—at another you are incredulous. But I am wrong—oh! I am wrong to be thus irritable," he exclaimed, his voice suddenly altering to a tone of contrition: "for I know that it is difficult for you to put faith in this marvel which has suddenly presented itself to your view. Let me then remind you of all our old transactions—the issue of the spurious coin—the imprisonment of Sir Richard Stamford in Thacker's Court—and the attempt which *you* made upon my life on the river, near Execution Dock," added Ramsey, fixing his eyes upon the countenance of the Big Beggarman.

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed the latter: "I am convinced now. But you must tell us all about it, sir——"

"Yes, yes—when we have leisure and are alone together," interrupted Ramsey. "And now let me beseech you once more to retain my secret——"

"It wouldn't do us no good to reveal it," observed the Big Beggarman. "Besides, we're too glad to fall in with an old employer, and under such peculiar circumstances, to think of doing you a mischief."

"Besides, we can all row in the same boat under the death's-head and cross-bones," said the Magsman, in allusion to the flag adopted by pirates. "And now, sir, by what name are we to know you in future?"

"Gustavus Wakefield," was the response.

"Then come on board the *Royal George* brig, Mr. Wakefield," said the Magsman; "and there we'll make you as comfortable as possible."

The resuscitated criminal accordingly prepared to follow Joe Warren from the schooner's deck: but, suddenly bethinking himself of certain objects which he had left in his cabin, he hurried down to take possession of them. Those objects, which consisted of money and important documents, he speedily secured about his person; and with his portmanteau thrown over his shoulder, he proceeded on board the *Royal George*. To this same pirate-ship was the cargo of the *Fire-Fly* speedily transferred by the buccaneers; and, as soon as this task was accomplished, a large hole was bored in the bottom of the gallant schooner, which was left to sink as speedily as it might.

Away bore the *Royal George*,—away on its voyage towards the American coast; and in the course of that day did the Magsman and the Beggarman find time to pass an hour alone with Ramsey. Then from the mouth of this unhappy being did they hear the wondrous tale of his resuscitation; and they were about to explain, in their turn, the incidents which had hurried them on into the avocation of freebooters, when Watkins, the individual who acted as captain of the *Royal George*, rushed into the cabin to inform them that a British man-of-war had just been descried in the distance.

It was verging towards sunset when this announcement was made; and in a few minutes the report of a cannon booming over the bosom of the Atlantic, conveyed the unmistakable command for the *Royal George* to hoist her colours. Accordingly up went the British flag to the mast-head of the brig: but a second cannon from the man-of-war bore across the waters the signal for the brig to heave to and wait until the ship should come up with her. This was an intimation which the pirates were by no means disposed to obey, inasmuch as it showed that the frigate—for such was the British man-of-war now in sight—entertained some suspicion or misgiving with respect to the *Royal George*. A speedy council of war was therefore held; and it was resolved that the pirate-brig should disobey the signal of the king's ship, and trust to the coming darkness to escape the pursuit which was certain to be instituted.

The *Royal George* accordingly crowded all her canvass upon mast and spar; and away—away she sped with surprising velocity, over the waters the hues of which were deepening in proportion as the sun sank lower into the west. A third cannon was fired on board the frigate: but the brig heeded it not,—and the last beams of the orb of day, ere it sank into the bosom of the occidental waves,

flickered upon the white canvass of the *Royal George* as it dashed madly over the rising billows, and on the still ampler sails of the superb frigate as she pressed onward in the exciting chase.

The wind was increasing in strength; and the sunset was succeeded by a night of inky darkness. For hours and hours did the *Royal George* thus hold on through the pitchy gloom which was almost deep and dense enough to be felt; and the crew fondly hoped that their gallant ship would escape the frigate altogether.

Anxious, therefore, were the looks which sought to penetrate through the first glimmering of the dawn: piercing were the glances that the pirates threw in all directions from the mast-head and the deck of the *Royal George*, the moment that the faintest gleam appeared in the eastern horizon. For a few minutes there was a solemn stillness throughout the vessel—an awful uncertainty, composed of a dread apprehension and a faint hope: for, lo! in the distance there *was* an object which had already begun to assume the shape and semblance of a square-rigged ship. And by degrees, as that glimmering in the east advanced, like the rays of a lamp from the far-off depths of a huge cavern or profound sepulchre, the hope grew fainter and fainter still, and the apprehension stronger and stronger—until the former expired altogether, and the latter was realized by the presence of the British frigate within gun-shot distance of the *Royal George*.

And now there was a flash seen at one point of the long dark hull of the man-of-war; and in another moment the report of a cannon came booming over the deep blue sea on whose bosom the mists of obscurity were gradually yielding to twilight. All was consternation now on board the brig; and Watkins commanded the men to obey the signal-gun by bearing to. But the Magsman and Big Beggarman would not hear of anything short of a desperate resistance; and thus a serious quarrel was well nigh taking place on board the *Royal George*, when a second cannon from the frigate brought the buccaneers to their senses—for *this time* a shot came whizzing through the air. The ball struck the bowsprit which it shivered to pieces; and the command of Watkins now experienced no opposition on the part of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

The *Royal George* therefore lay to; and in about a quarter of an hour the English frigate came within hailing distance. This latter was a splendid vessel—carrying thirty-six guns—having tall tapering masts—and with an image of the Goddess Diana at the figure-head. A boat was speedily lowered; and in a few moments it ran alongside the pirate-brig.

"What is the name of your ship?" asked the lieutenant who was in command of the boat.

"The *Royal George*, sir," was the reply delivered by Watkins as he leant over the bulwarks: for as all the ship's papers were made out in that name, the buccaneers had not as yet dared to change it.

"Whence do you come?—and whither are you bound?" demanded the lieutenant from his seat in the boat.

"Liverpool—New York," laconically answered Watkins. "Will you board us, sir?—or am I to go to the frigate with the papers?"

"You will adopt the latter course, if you please," said the lieutenant.

"In one moment, sir," replied Watkins: and, turning away from the bulwark, he hurried down the companion-ladder into his own cabin to fetch the ship's papers.

"I say, old fellow, what the devil can this mean?" asked the Magsman, who, together with the Big Beggarman and Bradley, had followed Watkins to the cabin.

"The King's ship evidently suspects us," replied this individual. "It has no doubt heard of our adventure with the brig which we attacked and which was glad to pay us a thousand dollars as a compromise rather than fight it out. I told you it was foolish to begin buccaneering before you had touched at New York and got your business settled there, whatever it may be: because then you might have got fresh papers—given the ship a new name——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Magsman, impatiently; "it's no use talking of what you advised, or of what ought to have been done. It's true that we got a thousand dollars from the American brig t'other day—and that we took the whole cargo of the English schooner yesterday. But the latter has gone to the bottom; and the British man-of-war has got nothing to do with the other affair."

"Only that if they really can prove us to be pirates, we shall all be hanged at the yard-arm," said Watkins, solemnly.

"And what the devil are you going to do, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, who did not much admire the prospect thus disagreeably held out for his contemplation.

"I am going on board the frigate to tell as good a story and put as bold a face upon the matter as I can," said Watkins; "and if I succeed in making the captain of his Majesty's ship *Diana* believe that it's all right with us, I suppose you'll give me credit for some little good management?"

"But do you really think you *can* set at rest any suspicions that may be entertained?" demanded the Magsman, an unwonted feeling of uneasiness creeping over him.

"I must do my best," said Watkins, as he secured the ship's papers about his person. "Now, then—who will act as supercargo? Come, Bradley—you shall go with me in that capacity."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded the individual thus addressed.

Watkins and Bradley accordingly quitted the cabin together, and embarked in the man-of-war's boat, which instantaneously put off with them.

"I don't like the look of all this at all," said the Magsman to his companion in iniquity, when they were left alone together in the cabin of the *Royal George*.

"Watkins and Bradley going off along with each other in this manner—eh?" said the Beggarman. "Well, I don't like it either."

"Those two fellows have always stuck together like bricks from the very beginning," observed the Magsman.

"And I've often seen 'em in earnest conversation together," added the Big Beggarman. "But after all there may be nothing wrong betwixt them?"

"Well, I hope not. But wasn't Watkins in a devil of a hurry just now to lay to, even before the shot carried away our bowsprit?" said the Magsman.

"And then," he continued, the cloud deepening on his countenance as his suspicions grew stronger,—"didn't he seem to be precious ready to go on board the frigate, in spite of the danger of being run up at the yard's-arm?"

"I don't know what to think," said the Big Beggarman, in a state of most bewildering perplexity and painful uneasiness. "I can scarcely make my mind up to proclaim Watkins and Bradley both traitors and scoundrels: for didn't they negotiate that transaction between us and the American brig——"

"By heaven, they did!" cried the Magsman, slapping his hand violently upon his thigh as he leant against the cabin table: "and now a thought flashes to my mind!"

"What is it?" demanded the Big Beggarman, eagerly.

"I tell you what, Stephen—it was through that very affair we're now betrayed!" exclaimed Joe Warren. "By goles! I see it all—I see it all——and we *are* betrayed, as sure as I'm alive!"

"How do you know?—what do you mean?" inquired Stephen Price, *alias* the Big Beggarman.

"I mean that when Watkins and Bradley went on board the American brig to settle the compromise which the captain of that vessel proposed to make by paying the thousand dollars——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Beggarman, impatiently. "Well—what did Watkins and Bradley do on that occasion, think you?"

"They no doubt told the American captain to give information concerning us to the first cruiser he should meet," replied Joe Warren, his countenance expressing a diabolical hatred and a ferocious longing for vengeance against those whom he imagined to be engaged in betraying him.

"By jingo, that is not unlikely!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman. "Watkins alluded just now to that affair of the American brig—and even reproached us with it——"

"To be sure! A man always throws into your teeth the very thing which is to be made the instrument of your own betrayal and ruin," cried the Magsman bitterly.

"Betrayal—ruin!" echoed Philip Ramsey, who at that moment descended from the deck into the cabin, and whose ear caught those ominous words as he was gliding down the companion-ladder. "What mean you, my friends?" he demanded, with terrified looks thrown upon the two ruffians alternately.

"We mean what we say," replied the Magsman, ferociously: "that we are betrayed—and that we intend to sell our lives as dearly as possible."

"Betrayed!" echoed Ramsey once more. "By whom? Your captain and his mate have gone on board the frigate——"

"And they won't come back again, I'll be bound," added the Big Beggarman, gloomily. "Now, then, every man to himself in case of need;"—and he began to arm his own person to the very teeth.

"That's a good example, Steeve," said Joe Warren, fastening a cutlass to his own waist and sticking the belt round with pistols. "Now, Mr. Ram——Wakefield, I mean——"

But at this moment the din of a cannon broke upon their ears, and shook the *Royal George* as much as if it had been fired upon its own deck instead of from the frigate.

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman hurried up the companion-ladder; and the first glance they threw in the direction of the *Diana* showed them that she had moored much nearer to the brig and was evidently prepared to carry matters to the extreme, if resisted.

"My brave fellows," cried the Magsman, addressing the sailors of the *Royal George*, who were all collected in one group and gazing with evident uneasiness on the man-of-war,—"you need not remain in any suspense whatsoever. Prepare yourselves for the worst: we are betrayed! If we are taken we shall be run up to the yard-arm——"

"And so we mean to fight to the very last," added the Big Beggarman, flourishing his cutlass.

"Bravo," shouted the half-dozen sailors belonging to the *Royal George*, and who were disposed to follow the desperate fortunes of Joe Warren and Stephen Price rather than surrender with the certainty of being hanged.

A voice now hailed the brig from the deck of the frigate.

"Let us learn what the King's ship has to say to us," exclaimed some of the sailors of the *Royal George*. "Hark! it's the captain of the *Diana* that's going to speak!"

And such was the fact. The commanding officer of the man-of-war guaranteed their lives to *the sailors* if they would surrender at discretion: but from this proffered amnesty *the two ringleaders* (the Magsman and Big Beggarman being thereby meant) were excluded.

Scarcely was this proposal made, when the half dozen sailors of the *Royal George* precipitated themselves upon Joe Warren and Stephen Price with such unexpected suddenness that these two redoubtable individuals were overpowered in an instant. To disarm and bind them was the work of another moment; and as soon as it was perceived on board the frigate that the commanding officer's proffered amnesty with respect to the sailors' lives, had produced such immediate and important results, a galley was again put off to the *Royal George* to receive the prisoners and the rest of the crew. Into this boat were both the Magsman and the Big Beggarman accordingly forced to descend. The six sailors having thrown down their arms, likewise took their seats in the galley. Ramsey was compelled to follow—and the wounded sailor who had survived the slaughter on board the *Fire-Fly* schooner, was lowered in his hammock into the boat. A second galley now arrived from the *Diana* with an officer and some few sailors who were to take charge of the *Royal George*; and thus terminated the merchant vessel's brief career of piracy.

Sullen and silent, overwhelmed with the crushing sense of their sudden disaster, and cursing in the depths of their souls the treachery of Watkins and Bradley as well as the cowardly perfidiousness of the sailors,—Joe Warren and Stephen Price stood in a few minutes upon the deck of the *Diana* frigate.

But scarcely had they thus set foot on board the man-of-war, when an ejaculation of surprise struck upon their ears: and casting their looks in the direction whence the expression of wonder had emanated, they recognised the well known countenance of Tim Meagles!

CHAPTER CLXIV.

A LADY OF QUALITY IN DIFFICULTIES.

TURN we now to a moderate-sized but handsomely furnished house in Piccadilly—at no great distance from the larger and still more splendid mansion of Lord Florimel.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, and in the elegant breakfast-parlour of the moderate-sized dwelling just alluded to, a lady was half-sitting and half-reclining upon a sofa. A cheerful fire burnt in the grate: the curtains of scarlet satin gave with prismatic effect, a fainter tint of their own hue to the mellowed and subdued light which penetrated through the casements;—and the rich crimson of the paper on the walls and the velvet fittings of the furniture, all combined to render the complexion of the fair occupant of that apartment the more delicately lovely.

In the roseate atmosphere of the room, and reclining upon the deep crimson cushions of the sofa, this beauteous woman was set off to the utmost advantage by the morning-wrapper of white muslin which was gathered negligently around her. Her hair, of indescribable paleness, but glossy and shining, was floating partially over the back of the sofa, and partially upon her own alabaster shoulders, which her *deshabiller* left revealed. That hair, which was the lady was wont to wear in myriads of curls, when her toilette was completed for the day, was now flowing in all the beauteous abandonment of massive tresses; and it shone against the crimson velvet of the sofa like lace of flaxen material on which the sun is shining.

Her countenance was pale—very pale—and even slightly care-worn in appearance: but its extreme loveliness and purity would have disarmed the most critical observer of his objection to its colourless aspect. The hue of health had fled from her cheek; but the camellia-like damask still remained:—and moreover, it was evident that happiness and the mind's tranquillity would soon bring back the tint of the rose to mingle with the stainlessness of the lily. Besides, the red richness and the luscious fulness remained to the lips—the liquid blue and languishing expression to the eyes—and the classic stamp of elegance to the whole countenance!

Then her form—her admirable form—as it was stretched half-reclining upon that sofa, with as much abandonment of the person as was likely to be indulged in when the superb creature was in the solitude of her own parlour and in the negligence of her morning apparel—that fine form, we say, was now to be scanned at its fullest advantage. No corset gave an artificial shape or setting to any contour: the bust retained its rounded voluptuousness through its own natural plumpness;—the luxuriance of the lady's bosom marred not the perfect symmetry and rich shapeliness of either of those globes of snow.

Though her form had expanded into the maturity of its charms, yet was her entire figure characterised by an elasticity which imparted dignity to her carriage when walking, grace and ease to her attitude when sitting, and an air of ineffable abandonment and soft sensuousnesss to her whole person when reclining negligently as we find her now.

The muslin wrapper being slightly drawn up, displayed just so much of one of the lady's legs as to indicate by its beautiful moulding at the extremity and the robustness into which the delicacy of the ankle gradually swelled, that her limbs were modelled with a grace, a symmetry, and a richness corresponding with the extreme fulness of the bust and the taper elegance of the waist.

This lady, as the reader has doubtless already conjectured, was Mrs. Fitzherbert—the cast-off wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

She was reclining in a pensive mood upon that sofa—utterly unmindful of the personal charms which her unstudied attitude displayed. Nor indeed was there any necessity for a coquettish affectation on this occasion: for she was alone in that apartment—alone with her own sorrowing thoughts!

The cup of chocolate remained untouched upon the table—the newspaper lay unread upon the sofa. A dozen letters, from some frivolous lady-friends, or else containing invitations to balls and parties which she had no heart to grace with her presence, were tossed negligently aside—the very manner in which they lay, fully testifying the impatience with which they had been opened and the disgust or disappointment with which they had been flung aside the instant the few first lines of their contents were scanned.

The fact was that Mrs. Fitzherbert found herself in the most cruel embarrassment. Too proud to apply to the Prince of Wales for pecuniary assistance, she was utterly without resources at the present moment. Not an article of furniture in the house which she had taken was paid for; and the upholsterer was already clamorous for his money. He had heard from the neighbouring tradesmen that everything which went into Mrs. Fitzherbert's dwelling was delivered upon trust—that not a shilling had as yet been paid to any of her creditors—that the smallest accounts, which are usually cash-transactions, were never liquidated—and that her doors were constantly beset by duns. He had therefore become alarmed for the sum which Mrs. Fitzherbert owed him; and as the amount was two thousand pounds, he felt by no means inclined to lose it for want of putting the machinery of the law into motion. He had accordingly instructed his attorney to menace the lady with instantaneous process;—and as that professional gentleman happened to be Mr. Rigden, we need scarcely inform our readers that Mrs. Fitzherbert had little mercy to expect at his hands.

She had accordingly written to two friends, explaining her unpleasant position and demanding a loan. The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were the ladies to whom Mrs. Fitzherbert had thus unbosomed herself: and she had confidently expected supplies *by hand* on the previous evening, or at least *by post* on the same morning of which we are writing. But no answers of any kind had reached her: and she therefore felt assured that her two friends must be out of town.

What could she do?—to whom besides should she address herself? She had many wealthy acquaintances, it was true: but there were none, besides the splendid Georgiana of Devonshire and the amiable Eleanor of Desborough, whom she chose to admit into the privacy of her confidence. As for humbling herself so far as to write to the Prince—never! Her pride revolted against such a proceeding: for she could not forget the dastardly, detestably ruffian-like means which he had adopted to break off his connexion with her. Hap he thrown

himself upon her mercy - implored her to release him from a compact which menaced his prospects as heir to the British throne—and thus trusted entirely to her love, her generosity, and her friendship,—oh! she felt that their relative positions would have been very different indeed: but no—the *first gentleman in Europe* had, with characteristic heartlessness, employed the most villanous, cowardly, and despicable means in order to coerce her into a separation. Yes—she felt all this: and she vowed that she would sooner go to a debtor's gaol and rot there, than make the slightest appeal to the purse of the man who, though really her husband in the sight of Heaven, had nevertheless proved her bitterest enemy and her most cold-blooded persecutor.

Such was the position and such were the feelings of Mrs. Fitzherbert on this particular morning when we again introduce her to our readers' notice. Small wonder, then, was it that she was pensive and careworn—and that the colour had completely fled from her cheeks.

She was in the midst of a painful reverie, when the door was opened softly—and an ill-looking countenance protruded itself. The door was then pushed more widely open; and the entire person of the individual to whom the disagreeable physiognomy belonged passed into the room. He was followed by another man as repulsive in appearance as himself; and the two individuals, stopping short, exchanged looks, or rather made grimaces at each other, as much as to imply what a capital piece of fun it was! They then took a survey of the apartment;—and having once more expressed their delight by vulgar grins at the stealthy manner in which they had introduced themselves, they advanced towards the sofa.

The sound of their footsteps now fell for the first time upon Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears: and, gazing round with a sudden start, she was both amazed

and terrified at beholding the unceremonious visitors. But almost instantaneously recovering the dignity which was natural to her, she rose from the sofa—drew the morning-wrapper hastily over her bosom—and said in a haughty tone, "Who are you?"

"The lady says who are we, Jack," observed one of the men, looking in a leisurely way at his companion. "I should think she ought to suspect *you* at any rate, by that hang-dog wisage of your'n."

"It 'ud be a heavy bribe, master, that 'ud make me call *you* 'ansom, at all ewents," was the reply, delivered in a half-sulky, half-subdued tone of menial dependence.

"Again I ask who are you?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert; though her fears had already suggested the reply to the question.

"Well, ma'am," observed the individual who had first spoken, and who was dressed with a shabby kind of flashiness, "I won't keep you in no manner of uncertainty on this ere pint. My name's Nathan Crimp, and my office is in Chancery Lane. That's my man; and his name's Jack. What his t'other name be, I don't know—and don't think he does his-self."

"I presume, then, that you are an officer?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her heart appearing to rise into her throat and suffocate her as she thus ventured to give utterance to the cruel suspicion that involved a crowning misfortune.

"Lord bless you, ma'am," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, "I thought you knowed all along who we was, and only asked just by way of a matter of form like. I'm sure if I'd suspected for a moment that you was in the dark as to our identity, I should have put you up to that dodge the wery first moment. But when your flunky down in the hall there said that he'd come up and announce us, I told him not to trouble his-self, but just show us which room you was in, and we'd announce ourselves. And so me and my man Jack there, we stole in as quiet as mice, so as not to disturb you, ma'am—which was wery considerate on our part, seeing that Rigden won't pay us a bit the more for doing the thing genteelly."

"Then am I to understand that Mr. Ridgen has had recourse to extreme measures?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining a violent outburst of hysterical grief.

"Rigden always does, ma'am," replied Mr. Crimp, who was the most garrulous sheriff's-officer ever known. "He's a sharp 'un, ma'am—a preshus sharp 'un—isn't he, Jack?"

"Wery, master," growled the individual thus appealed to. "Rigden ain't a man to stand still while there's anythink to be got by going on a-head."

"By goles, you're right there, my boy," ejaculated Mr. Nathan Crimp. "And now, ma'am," he said, adopting a mincing tone of excruciating politeness, as he put his hat under his arm and produced a piece of paper of very ominous form and aspect,—"perhaps you'll be so kind as to pay me the sum of two thousand pounds and seventeen shillings, debt—together with four guineas, costs——"

"To cut the matter short at once, sir," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I have not the slightest means of settling this liability. You must therefore place an execution in the house—and I will forthwith apply to my friends."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," observed Crimp; "but you altogether mistake the natur' of this here business. Don't the lady, Jack?"

"No wonder—since you've took all this time to explain it," said the man, with sulky laconism.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp, crushing his hat under his arm with the sudden paroxysm of excitement into which his follower's audacious observation threw him. "Who the devil would have thought that the lady didn't understand the thing all along? Here's a *ca-sa.*, and all in order, ma'am: and now if you'll be so obleeging as to come along with me to Chancery Lane——"

A light broke in upon the brain of the unhappy lady—and the half-stifled shriek which burst from her lips cut short the garrulity of Mr. Nathan Crimp. Until within the last minute she had fancied that the officer's purpose was merely to put an execution into the house—a process to which she had not been altogether a stranger in her lifetime: but now that she found her personal freedom to be actually compromised and that it was her arrest which was contemplated, a sudden coldness struck to her heart—and unable altogether to subdue her feelings, she gave vent to that expression of anguish which interrupted the garrulity of the bailiff.

Falling back upon the sofa whence she had risen on discovering the presence of the intruders, Mrs. Fitzherbert actually thrust her handkerchief into her mouth to crush the emotions that were struggling for hysterical ebullition;—and Mr. Nathan Crimp, under the impression that she was about to faint away, rushed forward—pulled a brandy-flask from his pocket—and was about to make an attempt to pour some of the burning fluid down the throat of the elegant lady of quality, when his man Jack caught him by the arm, growling a savage remonstrance in his ear at the same time.

This little bye-play on the part of the bailiff and his follower had the effect of reminding Mrs. Fitzherbert of the necessity of maintaining her dignity in the presence of those men;—and, crushing her emotions with an almost superhuman effort, she turned towards Crimp, saying, "If I make you a handsome present, will you allow this process to stand over till to-morrow?"

"It can't be done, ma'am," was the prompt reply. "You see, the caption's made, and can't be unmade save and except by payment on the von hand or a discharge on the t'other. My man Jack is a vitness to the caption being made aforesaid—and he can't un-vitness it, as the sayin' is. Them's the difficulties, ma'am."

"But you will at least grant me a few hours to send to my friends and procure the money?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her tone becoming less imperious and her manner more conciliatory as the precise details of her position developed themselves one after another in all their painful and perplexing reality.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind leaving my man Jack to keep you company for an hour or so, while you send round to your friends," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp, after a few moments' consideration. "But you see, I can't lose sight on you altogether—or else you ceases to be in custody, and that's as good as flight and escape on your part, whereby Rigden could go and fix the Sheriff for the whole debt."

"You mean me to understand, then," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining alike her indignation and her tears, but almost choking through the efforts which it cost her thus to dam up the natural flow of her feelings,—"you mean me to understand that either yourself or your follower must remain in charge of my person until I am securely lodged in——"

"My lock-up in Chancery Lane," added Crimp, finishing the sentence in the manner which the lady's emotions would not permit her to achieve.

"But you must at least allow me to retire to my own room and dress myself becomingly?" said the lady, feeling so truly wretched that she would have welcomed even Death at the moment, in whatever shape he might have chosen to appear.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," hastily ejaculated Mr. Crimp: "but not without my examining the room aforehand to see whether there's any inner doors leading elsewhere. And even supposing it's all right in that respeck, my man Jack must remain outside in the passage to see that you don't forget yourself and walk off to pay a morning wisit—or go out shopping—or take a airin' in the park——"

"Enough—enough!" exclaimed Mrs. Fizherbert, the bitter cup of her humiliation being now, as she fancied, full to overflowing.

But she was speedily destined to experience more poignant pangs—more mortifying rebuffs—and more distressing reverses.

CHAPTER CLXV.

THE LADY OF QUALITY AND HER DOMESTICS.

THERE was a long pause after Mrs. Fitzherbert had abruptly and imperiously cut short Mr. Nathan Crimp's speculations as to the course which she might pursue were she suffered to remain unwatched by either himself or his man. The unhappy lady revolved in her mind a thousand plans in a minute: but none appeared equal to the present emergency. For the case was urgent in the extreme: two thousand pounds must be paid at once—or to a lock-up house must she go.

While Mrs. Fitzherbert was thus deliberating upon her difficulties and the means of extricating herself therefrom,—and while Crimp was whispering aside to his man Jack that "the fine lady would have to go to quod arter all,"—the door was suddenly thrown open, and in bounced a tall, handsome, but bold-looking young woman, dressed in a very coquettish style. This was the principal lady's-maid in the establishment of Mrs. Fitzherbert, in whose service she had been for some years, and by whom she was regarded as a confidante and even friendly adviser.

"I am engaged at present, Alicia, you perceive—disagreeably engaged," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, somewhat surprised and annoyed at the unceremonious manner in which the abigail had burst into the apartment. "When I want you I will ring."

"Very good, ma'am—you *may* ring," exclaimed the lady's-maid, who had evidently made up her mind to put a bold and insolent front upon the matter which she had in hand: "but perhaps I shan't come."

"Alicia, *this* from *you*?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, who a minute before would have staked her soul upon the fidelity, attachment, and gratitude of a domestic whom she had ever treated with especial consideration.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind saying this *is* from me," was the prompt reply. "But all I want is my wages, if you please, ma'am—eighteen months' arrears, besides thirty-four guineas of my little savings which you kindly offered to take care of for me, ma'am," continued the abigail, with a mixture of sarcasm and superciliousness in her tone and manner.

"Alicia, you *must* understand my present position," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, dashing away the tears which had started forth upon her long lashes, and speaking in an appealing tone. "You see these men—and you can comprehend their mission."

"Yes, ma'am, I see the men," rejoined Alicia, in a voice of dogged insolence: "and it's precisely because I *do* see them *here* that I want my wages and the money that's owing to me. I don't suppose a lady like you means to cheat a poor hard-working creature like me out of the pittance that happens to be due."

"Alicia, I am incapable of cheating any one," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance flushing with sudden indignation.

"I'm delighted to hear it, ma'am," observed the abigail, with the most provoking doggedness; "because it's a proof that you mean to pay me what's due and let me take myself off at once."

"Is it possible that you intend to desert me at this moment?" exclaimed the unhappy lady, who now felt as if all the world were abandoning her.

"I don't see how you can afford to keep me any longer, ma'am," was the answer; "and I really don't feel inclined either to work for nothing or keep myself when out at service."

Mrs. Fitzherbert passed her handkerchief hastily over her countenance and endeavoured to subdue her emotions sufficiently to give a calm and dignified response to the lady's-maid: but at the same instant the door was again opened—and the butler entered the room.

He was a sleek, stout, comfortable-looking man, of middle age, and attired with great precision in a black suit: but his shirt-frill, cravat, and wristbands were of the finest linen and most snowy whiteness.

Making a low bow, he advanced up to the sofa where his mistress was seated; and bending down towards her, said in a whispering tone fraught with the profoundest respect, "Would it be convenient, madam, for you to settle my little account?"

"What! *you* likewise have turned against me, Robinson?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, aloud.

"I do not deserve such a reproach, ma'am," answered the butler, in a soft tone and an insinuating manner. "But I must take leave to remind you, madam, with every sentiment of respect and every feeling of devotion, that I am responsible to the wine-merchant—the butcher—the baker—the grocer—and sundry other tradesmen; and that unless I liquidate their bills *this very morning*, ma'am, I shall be put to serious inconvenience ere night-fall."

"What do you mean, Robinson?" demanded the lady. "*You* are not responsible for my debts!"

"But those persons hold that I am, madam," replied the butler. "At all events, individuals in *my* situation do not choose to quarrel with individuals in *their's*—and consequently with all due submis-

sion and respect, I wish to see these little matters settled at once."

But before Mrs. Fitzherbert had time to make another comment upon the butler's demands, the door was thrown open again, and the coachman entered the room.

He was a short, stout, red-faced man, with small twinkling green eyes, and an air of *dogged* resolve apparent beneath the look of good-nature which first struck the observation. He wore the powdered wig and the gorgeous livery which a detestable fashion *then* imposed, and *still* imposes, upon that class of British serfs who belong to the grade of flunkeyism:—and always having hated the disgusting badge of slavery which he was compelled to wear, he was of a disposition by no means likely to allow an opportunity to pass of venting his spite upon any member, whether male or female, of that aristocratic class which upholds the system whereby a distinctive garb is given to the man-servant in the lordly dwelling as well as to the pauper in the workhouse or to the felon in the gaol.

Darting a rapid glance of inquiry upon the lady's-maid and the butler, and receiving from each of them as prompt a look expressive of a negative, the coachman made an awkward kind of a bow—for he was a clumsy man and had been engaged in Mrs. Fitzherbert's service solely on account of his obesity, fat persons being preferred by the rich folks for the office that he filled.

"Now, Matthews, what do *you* want?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, her indignation once more triumphing over her affliction and bringing the blood to her cheeks.

"Please, ma'am," was the response, delivered in a hoarse tone which was habitual with the man, "I wait upon you as a deppitation——"

"A what?" cried the lady, in unfeigned astonishment.

"A deppitation from the domestics which is now assembled down in the servants' hall," continued the coachman; "and bein' a deppitation from them——

"What does he mean, Robinson?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, turning towards the butler.

"He means a deputation, madam," replied the individual thus appealed to: then, all his former blandness of tone and manner changing into a cold reserve which the slightest provocation would push into a haughty insolence, the butler added, "And I really think, ma'am, with all due respect, that this is *not* the time to assume the airs of a great lady and affect ignorance of the man's meaning just because his pronunciation *may be* somewhat defective."

If a glance had the power to kill, the look which Mrs. Fitzherbert threw on the butler would have transfixed him on the spot. Had she been the recognised wife of the Prince of Wales—had she been in the full enjoyment of the title of "Her Royal Highness," she could not have assumed at the instant a more majestic bearing nor a mien of haughtier grandeur. Her brows arched more nobly—her carriage grew more queen-like—her bosom swelled more superbly,—and this was all the work of a single moment.

"And now, Matthews, what is it?" she demanded, turning once again towards the coachman.

"Please, ma'am," said this individual, "I come on the part of myself and them of my fellow-servants as isn't here now at this present speaking, but is anxiously waiting below for me to go back to them to report the success of my arrand. And what I have to say may be summed up in a werry few words—which is, ma'am, we hopes and expects you'll pay us all the arrears of vages which is doo to us."

And having thus delivered himself, the coachman cast a determined look around, not only upon his mistress, the butler, and the lady's-maid, but likewise upon the two bailiffs who were standing apart enjoying the scene which we are relating.

"I now perceive that your conduct towards me, is the result of a plan previously settled and resolved upon," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, sweeping her indignant glances around upon the three domestics: "for I did not fail to notice the look of intelligence which passed between you when Matthews first entered the room just now. That look asked as plainly as eyes can ever speak, whether *you*, Robinson, and *you*, Alicia, had been paid your demands upon me;—and the responsive glances which *you* both threw back, were significant of the negative. Now I am well aware that you are entitled to your wages—and I deeply, deeply regret that I cannot liquidate them in full at this moment. But I cannot: and even while explaining myself thus frankly, I must observe that the course which *you*, Robinson and Matthews, have adopted towards me is unmanly in the extreme—while *your* conduct, Alicia, is unfeeling to a degree. I have now no more to say—unless it be that I am going hence to a prison, but that in the course of this day or to-morrow, I will borrow from my friends enough to pay all I owe to my servants."

And Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose voice had begun to faulter only when she made so unmistakable an allusion to a debtor's gaol, now turned abruptly aside and concealed her face in her handkerchief.

"We are robbed as completely as if our pockets was picked!" exclaimed the coachman, at the top of his hoarse, rough voice, while he stamped his foot savagely down upon the floor.

"It's a dead take-in—a downright cheat," screamed the lady's-maid, in thrilling tones that vibrated with hysterical rage.

"Every sentiment of respect which I lately experienced towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, has now evaporated," said the butler; "and I must candidly and freely confess that I agree with the remarks which have fallen from Mr. Matthews and Miss Alicia. In a word, we are all the victims of a mere adventuress."

"The idea of such a pauperised upstart-creatur' a venturin' to put a man like me into such a cussed toggery as this!" exclaimed the coachman, tossing his powdered wig indignantly on one side and throwing off his lace-bedizened coat on the other.

"A lady who takes a butler should be able to pay him," said Mr. Robinson: then, with all the bitterness of sarcasm which the natural malignity of his disposition could enable him to throw into his language, he observed, "Even the very lowest of kept women always pay their servants whom they are obliged to turn off because they themselves are turned off by their paramours."

"To be sure!" added Alicia: "the common street-walker takes care of her servants——"

"And therefore I'm sure the prostitute of fashionable life ought to do the same," remarked the butler

"Begone, vile wretches!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting from the mournful reverie into which she had fallen, and springing at the same time from the sofa, her whole frame quivering with indignation, her cheeks glowing with the hue of crimson, and her eyes lighting up into the brightest fires. "Begone, I say—and dare not to level your foul slander against me!"

"Hey-dey! what does all this mean?" cried Alicia. "Slander indeed! I suppose it's no slander to say that you lived with the Prince as his concubine——"

"And was bundled out neck and crop t'other day," observed the coachman.

"Like any cast-off slipper," added the butler.

"Oh! if I dared but proclaim the truth!" murmured the unhappy lady, flinging herself back upon the sofa and pressing her hands against her throbbing brows, as if she could thereby steady their violent pulsation. "Leave me—I beseech you to leave me! If you will not obey my wish as a command, you will grant it as an act of mercy," she said, in a more audible voice and with a manner expressive of urgent entreaty.

"Well, let us take ourselves off, Mr. Robinson," said Alicia. "I'm sure I don't know how I shall ever get a place again, after being in the service of such a characterless demirep as this."

"A harlot without even a pension!" observed the butler, in a tone of the deepest disgust: so that it is fair to suppose that Mrs. Fitzherbert would have appeared less blameable in his eyes had her name been foisted on the pension list, along with those of the Dukes of Grafton, St. Albans, Richmond, and Cleveland, and other nobles who enjoy the hereditary right of plundering the Public Treasury simply because they are descended from some of the lascivious wretches who prostituted their persons to that execrable monarch Charles the Second.

"Ah! 'tis a reg'lar break-up—a awful smash," observed the coachman, volunteering the remark by way of appendix to the last one which had fallen from the lips of the butler. "There's a many people will be ruined by this here woman's fall," he continued, pointing to Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and some poor wictims of creditors will go and drown or hang theirselves when they hears that everything has gone to pot and the lady herself laid up safe in lavendar. But that's the way with them strumpets which gives theirselves the airs of Royalty for a time and then tumbles down into their natral sphere. What wexes me most of all, is to think that I ever put on that cussed wig and this trumpery gew-gaw livery just to please the wanity of a creatur' as will come down to be a reglar street-valker arter all."

"Yes—and we shall yet see her picking oakum in Bridewell!" hysterically shrieked forth Miss Alicia as she bounced out of the room.

"Having no sentiment of respect left, and wondering that I could ever have entertained any at all," said the butler, "I not only echo the anticipation of the last speaker, but likewise confidently hope to see it speedily fulfilled."

"And now we may all take ourselves off, as thoroughly swindled and robbed as ever a set of poor hard-working devils was," growled the coachman.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears caught not these volleys let off by the retiring enemy—for she had fainted!

When she returned to consciousness she found herself lying upon the sofa, with Mr. Nathan Crimp bending over her and sprinkling water on her countenance—while his man Jack held the basin into which the bailiff thrust his dirty fingers in order to switch off the drops of the cooling element in the most convenient manner.

Hastily and somewhat haughtily thanking the two officers for their attention, Mrs. Fitzherbert begged them to grant her an hour's grace ere they insisted on her removal to a lock-up house;—and this boon being accorded, she penned half-a-dozen letters to intimate friends, whose pecuniary succour she earnestly requested "to save her from a most painful difficulty."

But when she rang the bell for the purpose of despatching her servants with those missives, Mr. Nathan Crimp very candidly informed her that she need not expect any response to the summons, inasmuch as the domestics had one and all quitted the house while Mrs. Fitzherbert was lying in a state of unconsciousness. The lady's cheeks flushed with indignation for a few moments, and then became ghastly pale, as she bit her quivering lip: tears also started forth upon her cheeks,—tears of mingled humiliation and rage—and not the first tears, either, which she had shed that morning!

Yes—it was indeed true: every one of the servants had departed, with a previous intimation to Mr. Crimp that they should send for their boxes in the course of the day;—and thus was Mrs. Fitzherbert's house as completely and as suddenly abandoned by all the dependants as if the plague had manifested itself in her own person.

Mr. Nathan Crimp now offered to take the letters for Mrs. Fitzherbert and await the answers at the houses where they were to be delivered; and to this proposal she was glad to assent. The bailiff's follower was however left behind to keep a strict watch upon the lady; and thus was the brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert,—the wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—the lately courted, worshipped, adored genius of the fashionable world,—thus was she, we say, deserted by her dependants and left to such care as a bailiff and his man might choose to take of her!

CHAPTER CLXVI.

THE LADY OF QUALITY'S ARISTOCRATIC ACQUAINTANCES.

Although Mr. Nathan Crimp saw as plainly as possible that Mrs. Fitzherbert's circumstances were in a very desperate condition, yet he was shrewd enough to calculate that a lady who had occupied such an elevated position in the fashionable world could not be utterly destitute of friends or denuded of resources; and he therefore saw every chance of being well remunerated for any little services he might perform or any indulgences he might allow.

The instinct of rats teaches them to abandon a house which is on the point of falling; and thus did the selfishness of the menials prompt them to hurry away from the scene of the crashing fortunes of their mistress. This fact had certainly led Mr. Crimp to believe that the break-up with Mrs. Fitzherbert was complete: but still, as we have observed, he felt pretty certain of recompense for his own services.

Provided therefore with the half-dozen letters, Mr. Nathan Crimp set out on the mission which he had undertaken; and, calling a coach, he ordered himself to be driven in the first instance to Lady Singleton's mansion in Clarges Street.

On alighting at the splendid abode, Mr. Crimp knocked and rang in a somewhat authoritative manner: for he considered that he was now performing the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert's *friend* and therefore derived a certain dignity from that position.

"Well, what is it, my man?" demanded the hall-porter, surveying Mr. Crimp with a somewhat suspicious eye.

"Is your missus at home?" asked the bailiff, assuming a look and manner of awful importance.

"D'ye mean the housekeeper or cook—which?" exclaimed the hall-porter, pursing up his mouth pompously when he had put the question.

"I mean Lady Singleton — that's which," responded Mr. Crimp. "So you'll just be so kind as to give her this here dokiment—you may take your davy it isn't a writ—and tell her as how the genelman which brought it is a-waiting her ladyship's pleasure."

"What name shall I say?" inquired the hall-porter.

"What name—sir? Nathan Crimp, if you must know," was the prompt reply.

The countenance and manner of the hall-porter changed in an instant: it was ice suddenly thawing—or rather turning into the most dulcet honey. For the fact was that the man understood the bailiff's answer to be precisely this:—"What name? Sir Nathan Crimp, if you must know." The consequence was that the liveried functionary was seized with the conviction that the shabby-looking visitor was some eccentric baronet not over particular in his toilette, but probably very rich;—and he therefore, without any more ado, ushered the sheriff's-officer up into the drawing-room—throwing open the door and bawling out in the usually ceremonial manner, "Sir Nathan Crimp!"

Lady Singleton was the widow of a baronet whose family was distinctly traceable back (thanks to the inventive genius of certain clever dealers in vanity-fictions at the Heralds' College) to the reign of William Rufus. Her ladyship was now in her fiftieth year; and when inheriting her late husband's immense fortune, she had carefully preserved all his ancestral pride likewise. She was childless: some distant relative of her deceased husband had succeeded to the baronetcy, while she secured all the broad lands and the hoarded cash; and she was therefore on the look out for a new matrimonial venture.

At the precise moment when the bailiff was so pompously announced by the hall-porter as Sir Nathan Crimp, Lady Singleton was seated in the drawing-room with her "toady," or "companion." A toady, or companion, is a poor gentlewoman who wants a home and everything else, and is therefore glad to accept all those requisites upon conditions which, if not absolutely specified in a verbal or written contract, are generally understood. For a toady must be a woman of cheerful disposition, or at least must invariably seem to be cheerful: she must never give way to bad spirits—never have a headache—never be out of sorts—never grumble at anything—never be discontented. On the contrary she must be satisfied with everything that the lady with whom she lives may say or do: she must never contradict—never have an opinion of her own—never see with her own eyes, nor hear with her own ears, nor think with her own mind: in fact, she must perform all those functions through the organs and senses of her patroness. She must always be prepared to go out when the lady goes out, or stay at home when the lady stays at home: she must nurse and coddle the lady when she is ill, and put up with all her caprices, whims, and fancies when she is well. She must always be ready to become a scapegoat, as well as an object against which her patroness may vent a passing ill-humour: she must carry the prayer-book to church on Sunday, and hold the lap-dog on her knees in the carriage;—and she must take excellent care not to draw towards herself that admiration or those attentions on the part of the other sex which are looked upon as the rightful monopoly of her patroness. These are the duties and functions of a toady; and for the discharge of the same she is lodged, fed, salaried, and rewarded with cast-off gowns into the bargain.

Lady Singleton, then, was with Miss Jukes, her "companion," when the bailiff was announced. Miss Jukes was forty-two years of age—short, stumpy, fat, and good-humoured: Lady Singleton was tall, scraggy, and prim. The high-sounding name of Sir Nathan Crimp made them both start;—and when they fixed their eyes upon the dirty, half-shabby, and half-flashy appearance of the bailiff, they were rather shocked for a moment. But the same thought which had already struck the hall-porter, simultaneously sprang up in the minds of those ladies; and they accordingly concluded that the visitor must be some eccentric baronet or knight, whose enormous wealth was perhaps so notorious as to counteract any disagreeable results which might arise to himself in consequence of the neglect apparent in his toilette.

The hall-porter placed a chair for the bailiff's accommodation, and then withdrew. Crimp seated himself on the edge of the chair—crushed his hat nervously between his knees—plucked up a spirit—and said, "Beg pardon, ladies—but I'm a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert, which is a lady not unbeknown to you——"

The widow and Miss Jukes exchanged rapid glances, as much as to say, "What extraordinary English our new friend talks:" but the announcement that he was a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert disarmed them of any suspicion which the little grammatical solecisms might have engendered concerning him.

"And pray how is that dear lady?" inquired Miss Jukes. "It is a week since you saw your excellent friend Mrs. Fitzherbert," added the toady, turning towards Lady Singleton.

"It is, my dear," responded the wealthy widow. "I have been very neglectful in not calling upon her: but really what with Lady Pooke's card-party—the Honourable Mrs. Dulcimer's drum—the Countess of Blandingford's rout——"

"Oh! yes, indeed, my dear Lady Singleton, you have been so very, very gay during the past week!" exclaimed Miss Jukes. "But then, you know, you are so much sought after—such a favourite——"

"Well, perhaps I am, my dear," said Lady Sin-

gleton, complacently. "Society is very kind to me—society spoils me—I am its pet child——"

"Rayther a old child—up'ards of fifty, I take it," muttered Crimp to himself.

"What did you say, Sir Nathan?" inquired Lady Singleton, with a bland smile that showed her false teeth.

"I was a-saying, ma'am, that I shouldn't have took your ladyship to me more than five or six and thirty—there or thereabouts," responded the bailiff.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Miss Jukes, as if lost in amazement. "Did you ever know such an accurate guess? Really, Sir Nathan, you must be quite a wizard to have hit so fully upon the truth respecting my dear Lady Singleton's age."

"Lord bless ye, ma'am," cried Mr. Crimp, winking at Miss Jukes in a very knowing manner; "I'm one of the downiest coves at that there kind of thing in all England. But about our dear Mrs. Fitzherbert—I s'pose you've both on you the greatest esteem and respeck for that lady."

"I would go to the end of the world to serve her!" exclaimed Lady Singleton, emphatically.

"And I'll be bound to say t'other lady would go to the devil for the same purpose?" remarked the bailiff, pointing his dirty fore-finger at Miss Jukes.

"I certainly would go very great lengths for Mrs. Fitzherbert," said the toady: then, getting up under pretence of poking the fire, she whispered rapidly in the ears of her patroness, "Depend upon it this is a sporting baronet—a regular country squire."

"Just so, my dear," returned Lady Singleton, in the same low and quick tone. "Very vulgar—but very rich, I dare say."

Miss Jukes looked her assent to this opinion on the part of her patroness and resumed her seat.

"By the bye," said Lady Singleton, "I wonder whether it can be really true that Mrs. Fitzherbert has broken altogether with the Prince—or whether she has merely taken a separate establishment in consequence of the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness? Which do you think it is, my dear?" asked the lady, appealing to Miss Jukes.

"I should really like to hear *your* opinion first, my beloved friend," said the companion, in a tone of deferential entreaty.

"Well—I will frankly confess that I think the separation is only feigned on account of the approaching marriage," replied Lady Singleton.

"And I agree with you perfectly," exclaimed Miss Jukes, who would have said precisely the same had her patroness adopted the other opinion upon the subject. "And now perhaps Sir Nathan will give us *his* ideas——"

"We'll come to that pint in a moment, ladies," interrupted the sheriff's-officer. "I'm quite delighted to hear that your friendship for Mrs Fitzherbert is so great——"

"There is no sacrifice I would not make for her," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "She should command all my fortune, were she ever unfortunately placed in a situation to require such a manifestation of my love and esteem. You know, Miss Jukes, that I am sincere in what I now say."

"I can conscientiously bear testimony to the truth of your ladyship's declarations," said the toady; "and no one can appreciate more deeply than myself the value, fidelity, and generous disinterestedness of your ladyship's friendship. In fact,—I do not say it to flatter your ladyship—because I hate flattery——"

"I know you do, my dear," observed the wealthy widow, quite seriously. "But do tell me what you were about to say, even if it were to reproach me with some fault or failing."

"Well, my dear friend," resumed Miss Jukes, adopting a tone of bland remonstrance and a look of gentle deprecation,—"I *am* going to be candid with you, and I *am* about to reproach you with a fault. In fact, you have one very great failing—and that is, you are *too* generous. You will really ruin yourself outright if you go on in this manner. Your purse is constantly open—your hand is always in your pocket. A friend requires a loan—a poor relation craves assistance — the miserable and wretched of the lower orders beseech eleemosynary assistance,—and you never refuse;—I do believe you could not say '*Nay*.' Now I think, Sir Nathan," added Miss Jukes, turning towards the sheriff's-officer, "you will admit with me that her ladyship *does* possess a very great failing, and that I was in the right to reproach her with it even at the risk of her friendship."

"Well, I don't think her ladyship will feel herself so aggrawated as to get up and punch your head for them remarks," said the bailiff, who did not however see through the disgusting flattery and sickening fulsomeness of Miss Jukes' proceeding. "But I'm as happy as a sand-boy to hear that her ladyship is so unkimmon generous: 'cos vy, if you'll on'y just read that there letter which the flunkey laid on the table——"

"I did not perceive any letter, Sir Nathan," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "Did you, Miss Jukes?"

"Oh! here it is," cried the toady, picking it up from the carpet on which it had fallen. "It is addressed to your ladyship, and is in the never-to-be-forgotten but ever-to-be-admired handwriting of our beloved friend Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"Be so kind as to read it, my dear," said Lady Singleton.

"Certainly," returned Miss Jukes, with a most amiable smile: and she proceeded to read the contents aloud in the ensuing manner:—

"I know, my dearest Lady Singleton, that you will be surprised to receive from me such a request as the one I am about to make; but I likewise feel that I may address myself in full confidence to your friendship. I have not time to enter into particulars: but I will explain everything when we next meet. What I require is the loan of a couple of thousand guineas for a week or ten days, to save me from a most painful difficulty."

"Good heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, snatching the note from the hands of the toady. "Yes—here is her signature: and 'tis her handwriting beyond all possibility of doubt! To what difficulty does she allude, Sir Nathan?—and why cannot you advance the money, since you are an intimate friend and doubtless a rich man?"

"I advance the blunt!" cried Crimp, throwing himself back in his chair and bursting into an uproarious fit of laughter. "Well, I'm damned if ever I heard anything better than that. By jingo! it beats cock-fighting hollow! I advance the tin!—ha! ha! ha!"

"And wherefore should you not, Sir Nathan?" demanded lady Singleton, now looking uncommonly demure, and even exchanging a suspicious glance with Miss Jukes.

"Why, because it would be rayther too good," responded Crimp. "But I suppose you'll make no difficulty in writing out a cheque which I'll run off and get keshed at the banker's at once——"

"You are really very accommodating, sir," interrupted Lady Singleton. "Don't you think he is, Miss Jukes?"

"I never knew any one more so," answered the companion.

"Come, now—no palavering about the matter," exclaimed Crimp. "You've told me how much you love Mrs. Fitzherbert—and how you'd sacrifice all your fortune to do her a service—and now the opportunity presents itself. 'Cos I'll be very candid with you, ma'am—and therefore the truth is that there's a writ out agin Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand pounds and odd; and if so be she don't settle in an hour or so, she'll have to go to a lock-up."

"Then her rupture with the Prince *is* complete?" cried Lady Singleton and Miss Jukes, as if speaking in the same breath.

"I'm afeard it be," said Crimp. "The more's the pity—'cos now the dear lady's on'y chance is in the good feelin's of her friends——"

"And pray, Sir Nathan, why do *you* not pay the money, I ask once more?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, drawing her prim form up to the full extent of its demure lankiness.

"I can't make out why you and t'other lady keep on calling me *Sir* Nathan," said Crimp: "'cos you'd better know the truth at vonce, and then you'll see why it isn't possible for *me* to come down with the stumpy. In a vord, then, I'm the hofficer which has made the caption—and my man has got Mrs. Fitzherbert in custody at this present speaking. Now, then——"

"What! you are not a baronet, then?" shrieked Lady Singleton, starting to her feet and surveying Mr. Nathan Crimp with mingled disgust and suspicion.

"Nor even a knight?" screamed Miss Jukes, rushing to the bell.

"Neither von nor t'other—and be damned to them!" was Mr. Crimp's very emphatic ejaculation. "But what is all this pother about?"

"Leave the room, sir!" cried Lady Singleton.

"Yes—be off with you!" exclaimed Miss Jukes, ringing the bell frantically.

"But what answer shall I convey back to Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded Crimp, dismayed at the sudden turn which the aspect of affairs had taken.

"I deeply regret, sir, that I have no money to lend," said Lady Singleton, in a severe tone. "Mrs. Fitzherbert is an extravagant woman—and she must pay the penalty of her thoughtlessness."

"To be sure!" cried Miss Jukes. "It serves her quite right."

"She is a proud upstart," continued Lady Singleton.

"And therefore her fall is merited," observed the toady."

"She can go to prison, for anything I care," exclaimed the worthy lady.

"And she may rot there too, without my breaking my heart on her account," added Miss Jukes.

At this moment the door was opened—and the hall-porter, accompanied by two tall footmen in gorgeous liveries, rushed into the room, the violent ringing of the bell having alarmed them.

"Turn that person out of the house," exclaimed Lady Singleton, pointing with unmitigated disgust at the bailiff. "He is an impostor."

"A thorough impostor," echoed Miss Jukes.

"And if Mrs. Fitzherbert should call or send," continued Lady Singleton, "mind that I am not at home."

"And never shall be at home any more to Mrs. Fitzherbert or any one from her," added Miss Jukes, with a look of bland appeal to her patroness.

"Quite correct, my dear," said Lady Singleton, tossing her head indignantly. "I always thought that Mrs. Fitzherbert was a low creature and no credit as an acquaintance."

"Yes—and you always said as much to me, I am sure," cried Miss Jukes. "The airs that she has given herself!—and the way she has come down! It's quite a judgment on her for her frailty," added Miss Jukes, who had three bastard children living at a farm-house in the country.

"You're right, my dear—it's a visitation of Providence on her head for her sins," remarked Lady Singleton, whose profligacy in her younger days was notorious to all but her besotted husband: and he, good easy man, believed her to be a paragon of virtue.

But we must leave this immaculate lady and her equally well-principled "companion" to pass their comments upon the fallen Mrs. Fitzherbert, while we follow Mr. Nathan Crimp, who, having been very unceremoniously bundled out of Lady Singleton's mansion, proceeded in the hackney-coach to the not less splendid abode of the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury in Park Lane.

During the ride thither Mr. Crimp revolved in his mind which was the best course to adopt; and it struck him that on this occasion he would represent himself as the mere messenger entrusted with a confidential communication, and in that capacity await the result. Accordingly, on arriving at the gate of Lady Banbury's superb dwelling, he gave a modest ring, and assumed no airs when questioned by a porter clad in such a radiant livery that if the sun had happened to be shining at the time the presence of that magnificent specimen of flunkeyism must have been perfectly bewildering.

"Walk in, my good fellow," said this tremendous individual, addressing Mr. Crimp with the most patronising urbanity. "Sit down in the hall—don't be afraid—we shan't eat you up—although I des-say the appearance of such a place *must* be rather overpowering to one unaccustomed to such splendour. Ah! poor man, I pity you—dweller in some back slums as you no doubt are!"

"It's exceedin' kind of you to sympathise with me," observed Mr. Crimp, who could have said if he had chosen that he had a well furnished house of his own in Chancery Lane: but as he was resolved to try the effect of humility in the present instance, he followed the porter into the marble hall with as much apparent deference as a pauper is compelled to show to the pompous beadle who conducts the wretched being to the workhouse.

"And now where's the letter?" demanded the porter.

"Here, sir," replied Mr. Nathan Crimp.

The countenance of the porter brightened up in an instant when he heard himself addressed as "Sir;" and, patting Mr. Crimp upon the shoulder in a paternal manner, he said, "Now I'll be bound that you'd like to obtain an audience of the Marchioness herself?"

"I should indeed," was the bailiff's prompt reply.

"You shall, then, my good feller—you shall, I can assure you," resumed the porter. "Here, George!" he cried, raising his voice to its highest key.

"What is it?" demanded a handsome youth of about sixteen or seventeen, and who was dressed as a page. "Did you call, Mr. Blossom?" he said, as he emerged from a waiting-room that opened from the marble hall.

"Georgey, my boy!" said the porter, who appeared to rejoice in the name of Blossom, "you will have the kindness to conduct this individual into the presence of her ladyship. He has an important communication to make to her."

"Very good, Mr. Blossom," said the handsome page. "Follow me, my man," he observed, turning towards Crimp.

Up a splendid staircase they went—across a landing crowded with statues, vases, and pictures—along a passage lighted from the ceiling—and then into an ante-chamber where a couple of pages as handsome and as elegantly clad as George himself, were lounging before the fire. One leaf of a pair of folding-doors was instantaneously thrown open by Crimp's guide; and the bailiff was ushered into a magnificent drawing-room, where an elderly lady was seated alone at one of the tables interspersed about.

The page advanced with noiseless step towards her—made a low obeisance—and said, "May it please your ladyship, a person has called upon some important business."

The lady raised her eyes—darted a rapid and scarcely perceptible look of mingled fondness and lascivious intelligence upon the beautiful youth—and then fixed her eyes upon Mr. Nathan Crimp, who respectfully placed Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter before her.

The handsome page withdrew;—and the bailiff now found himself alone with the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury. She was a lady in her fif-

tieth year, retaining all the traces of a beauty that must have been transcendently marvellous in her youthful days, but with a countenance modelled in a style that denoted the strongest passions. This sensuality of facial outline and general expression was however moderated, though not altogether subdued, by the unassuming—indeed, the extremely plain apparel which the Marchioness wore: and that comparative homeliness of dress contrasted strangely with the costly elegance which characterised the spacious apartment wherein she was seated.

"What is your business, my good man?" she inquired, in a soft voice and with mild demeanour.

"Please your ladyship, I've brought this here letter from Mrs. Fitzherbert," said Mr. Nathan Crimp: "and as it's private and confidential——"

"Ah! I understand," interrupted the Marchioness, her whole countenance becoming suddenly animated with delight. "Then you are doubtless acquainted with the nature of its contents?"

"To be sure I be, your ladyship," was the response.

"And the favour, then, is granted—and the two thousand guineas will be accepted?" exclaimed the Marchioness, speaking in a low confidential tone.

"How on earth could your ladyship guess——"

"Hush! not a word!" said the dowager, putting her finger upon her lip, while the sheriff's-officer, stopping short in his exclamations, gazed upon the lady with open-mouthed, staring, stolid wonder. "Sit down, my good man—sit down," she said, pointing towards a chair: "you are evidently a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved, valued, and very dearest friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert. I suppose, therefore, that you occupy some situation in her household?—or perhaps," added the Marchioness, lowering her voice to the most mysterious whisper,—"perhaps you are employed in the War Office?"

"Not quite *that*, ma'am," responded Mr. Nathan Crimp: "although I do hold a hofficial capacity, as the sayin' is——"

"Ah! I thought as much!" ejaculated the Marchioness, looking very sly and very cunning indeed: then, as she took up the letter which the bailiff had laid upon the table, she said, "Well, I am really delighted to think that Mrs. Fitzherbert should have used such despatch in complying with my request. It is a proof of friendship on her part which I shall never, never forget; and she may always rely upon my gratitude in return. Indeed, without this proof of her good feeling, I should ever have remained the most devoted—the most sincere—the most faithful of her friends. And I am still more charmed at the promptitude of her compliance with my request, inasmuch as it fully proves the falsity of the idle tittle-tattle which is now current concerning her, and which represents the rupture between herself and the Prince as complete: whereas I all along declared my firm conviction to be that it was only a concession judiciously made to public opinion, on the eve of an event which so closely regards the national interests — I mean the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick."

"I'm very much afeard that your ladyship is labouring under some mistake or another," said Mr. Nathan Crimp, who had listened with increasing bewilderment to the long speech just delivered.

"What mistake?—how can there be any error?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Banbury, now puzzled in her turn. "The matter is as plain and simple as possible; and since you are a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved friend Mrs. Fitzherbert, I will explain it to you in a moment. Then the two thousand pounds shall be immediately forthcoming——"

"That's exactly what I want, please your ladyship," cried the bailiff, chuckling at the thought of fingering so much coin and indulging in the gratifying expectation of receiving from Mrs. Fitzherbert at least a twenty-pound note for himself.

"Well, then, you see that there can be no error," resumed the Marchioness: "because if you are empowered to receive the amount just named, it is quite clear that the transaction is complete—and this note, which dear Mrs. Fitzherbert has sent me by you and which I will now at once proceed to open, unquestionably contains the intelligence——"

"It relates to the two thousand guineas, sure enough," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "But as for any service in return—or any transaction completed—I'm as entirely at sea as your ladyship seems to be yourself."

"This is most extraordinary!" cried the dowager. "Do let us understand each other, even before I open this letter. It will be much better."

"So I think, ma'am," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp. "Well, then—you speak fust and tell me what *your* notion of the business is."

"It lies in a nut-shell, my good man," said her ladyship. "The day before yesterday I wrote to Mrs. Fitzherbert requesting her to use her great influence to obtain a regiment for my second son, Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Willesden. In that note I hinted that if Mrs. Fitzherbert knew any poor person to whom she would like to present a couple of thousand pounds, that sum should be placed at her disposal for such a purpose. And now therefore, you perceive, that the transaction is doubtless completed—and that you have been sent to give a receipt for the amount just named."

"Then your ladyship was never more mistaken in your life," exclaimed Crimp: "although I dessay that if you will only assist Mrs. Fitzherbert in her present troubles, she'll get your son made not only a Colonel but also a Harchbishop, whenever she rekivers her power over the Prince."

"What do I hear?—what do you mean?" cried the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury, rising from her seat and now drawing herself up with all the stately haughtiness which England's insolent Aristocracy knows so well how to assume. "Mrs. Fitzherbert has lost her influence, you say?—and she is involved in troubles?"

"Terrible ones, may it please your ladyship," exclaimed Crimp. "But be so kind as to perooge her letter."

"It is scarcely necessary," observed the Marchioness, tossing the missive away from her with mingled aversion and disgust. "You can tell me in a few words what the woman wants with me—although I now more than half suspect."

"She hopes and trusts that your ladyship, for

riendship's sake, will lend her a couple of thousand guineas for a foo days," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, in as meek and humble a tone as he could possibly bring himself to adopt—although he had a presentiment that his visit to the Marchioness would prove at last as abortive as his appeal to Lady Singleton.

"Friendship!" ejaculated the Dowager, her face becoming purple with anger. "How dared the upstart Mrs. Fitzherbert to represent herself as the friend of the Marchioness of Banbury? No—thank God! there was never any friendship between *us*. I tolerated the woman—and that was all. But I always despised her vanity and foresaw that her pride would have a fall; and I am glad that the catastrophe has occurred. It will be a lesson to such women in future. Indeed I am very much to blame that I ever permitted a person of such a loose character and such disreputable morals to cross *my* threshold. Good morning to you!"

And the Marchioness stalked away, with the majestic bearing of an empress, to the farther end of the room—while Mr. Crimp sneaked off as discomfitted and crest-fallen as he well could be.

On regaining the hackney-coach, he was on the point of desiring the driver to return to Mrs. Fitzherbert's house—for he had no courage to apply in any other quarter on her behalf: but a second thought prompting him to give the experimental affair one more trial, he hastily examined the addresses of the four remaining letters, and selected the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery as the next personage to be applied to. Mr. Nathan Crimp accordingly drove to Grafton Street; and on alighting at the splendid mansion to which the reader has been already introduced on a former occasion, he rang the bell—delivered the letter—and quietly seated himself in the hall to await the result.

A quarter of an hour elapsed—and at the expiration of this interval the footman who had taken charge of the note, re-appeared with a request that Mrs. Fitzherbert's messenger would step up-stairs. This invitation struck Mr. Crimp as a favourable augury: and it was with considerable alacrity that he followed the gorgeously-clad domestic to an apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was seated in company with half-a-dozen ladies of rank and fashion.

The Dowager-Countess herself was a very fine woman, considering her age, which was assuredly verging towards sixty, despite of the exquisite skill wherewith the appliances of art were used to conceal the ravages of time. In her earlier years she must have been as eminently handsome as the Marchioness of Banbury: indeed, every feature of her countenance and every contour of her person retained the traces of former beauty. Her large dark eyes were piercing as arrows and still full of fire; and in her face was reflected the indomitable decision of her character. Haughty, proud, selfish, and unprincipled, she was one of those heartless women who care not, so long as they can achieve the aggrandizement of their families, if millions of hard-working Englishmen should perish of starvation. She was, indeed, a veritable type of the British peeress—narrow-minded, prejudiced, intolerant, luxurious, avaricious, extravagant, and cold-blooded to a degree. In her younger days she had been an intriguant in love: now she meddled in politics. She hated "the people" as cordially as she could: she firmly believed in the divine right of Kings;—she looked upon Charles I as a *martyr*—and she thought that "the lower orders" were only fitted to remain the serfs and slaves of the "upper classes." And these are the sentiments of ninety-nine out of every hundred ladies in the higher grades of English society.

On the present occasion, the Dowager-Countess had several titled visitresses staying with her in Grafton Street. They were all of high rank and great wealth; and they therefore despised every one who had not the same claims to consideration. The pride of each was sufficient to fill infinite space: the virtue of each might be compressed without difficulty into the smallest pill-box. For be it well understood—and we proclaim this as our honest, sincere, and deliberate conviction—that, with a few honourable exceptions, the titled ladies of this land are the most lascivious demireps in morals, the vilest hypocrites in religion, the most ostentatious counterfeits in their so-called benevolence, the most heartless tyrants towards their inferiors, and the most cordial haters of the working-classes that can possibly exist. Prudes in seeming, they are generally prostitutes in sooth; and the scandalous laxity of their morals is displayed by the fact that numbers of the proudest families in the aristocratic sphere make a glory and a boast of being descended from the shameless and disgusting harlots who flourished as the mistresses of Charles the Second.

But to continue. It was into the splendid apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was seated with her guests, that Mr. Nathan Crimp was shown. He was taken considerably aback on finding himself thus suddenly ushered into the presence of four or five elderly ladies all wearing huge turbans and seated in a kind of awful grandeur upon the crimson velvet sofas—while three or four younger ladies were grouped in the bay-window and reading Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter with very great attention. But Mr. Crimp made his politest bow—ran his fingers through his greasy hair—crushed his hat under his arm—and endeavoured to look at his ease, though in reality he felt as uncomfortable as if he were just going forth on a public scaffold to be hanged.

"Pray what is your name, my man?" asked the most majestic-looking lady of the whole assemblage, and whom the bailiff therefore instantaneously set down in his own mind as the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"My name's Crimp—Nathan Crimp, at your ladyship's service," was the prompt reply.

"And pray what has happened to our dear friend Mrs. Fitzherbert?" inquired the Dowager-Countess. "She alludes to some difficulty of a painful nature; and we are all dying with suspense to learn the sad truth."

"Well, it is sad enow, heaven knows," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, flattering himself that he had at last fallen in with sympathetic souls and that the advance of pecuniary supplies would necessarily follow.

"I suppose, then, that the dear creature—I mean, our excellent friend Mrs. Fitzherbert—has altogether broken off with a certain illustrious personage?" remarked one of the ladies, apparently addressing herself to the Dowager-Countess, but in reality levelling her observation in an interrogatory sense at Mr. Nathan Crimp.

"I dare say this person can tell you, my dear Lady Brunel," said the Dowager-Countess; "for he seems to be in the confidence of our unfortunate friend."

"Well, ladies, I'm afeard there ain't much doubt on that pint," observed Mr. Crimp. "The truth is, you see, Mrs. Fitzherbert is regularly done up just for the moment; and the little request she makes in that there letter which them there young ladies is a-perooging, will save her from a werry orkard dilemmy, if so be the faviour which she rekvires is granted."

"Oh! we will attend to that part of the matter all in due time," exclaimed the Dowager-Countess, assuming a tone and look of such remarkable condescension that Mr. Nathan Crimp felt as certain relative to the two thousand guineas as if he had them already buttoned up in his breeches'-pocket.

"What her ladyship wishes," said one of the elderly dames, likewise speaking in a bland tone and also unbending amazingly from the prim stateliness and icy rigidity which seemed natural to her; —"what her ladyship wishes," she repeated, glancing towards the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, "is to receive a full, frank, and candid explanation of those painful embarrassments which she is so urgently called upon to alleviate."

"Nothing can be more fairer or more straightfor'ard," exclaimed the sheriff's officer. "Well, then, the truth is, saving your ladyship's presence, that there's a writ out agin Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand guineas and up'ards, and all her servants has bolted off like shots—leaving the poor lady in a awful state."

"God bless me!" ejaculated the Dowager-Countess, shaking her head ominously. "How I do pity her, the poor dear creature!"

"I really could cry," exclaimed Lady Brunel.

"And I *am* crying," said the elderly dame who had just now spoken; "it is heart-breaking!" she added, applying her cambric handkerchief to her eyes.

The greatest sensation certainly prevailed in that room; and while the elder ladies manifested the most absorbing interest in Mr. Nathan Crimp's communications, the younger ones gathered nearer to him in order not to lose a word that might fall from his lips.

"And so our dearest friend is thus cruelly abandoned by all the world?" said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"If it wasn't for my man Jack which is bearin' her company," returned Mr. Crimp, "she would be all alone in that house of her'n at this blessed minute."

"Ah! you have a man there, then?" exclaimed Lady Brunel, who was the first to suspect what Mr. Crimp's calling really was, her eldest son having more than once fallen into the hands of the harpies of the law and she having visited him in a sponging-house on one occasion.

"Yes—my man's at Mrs. Fitzherbert's," said Crimp: "and if the debt isn't paid presently, she'll have to go to my lock-up in Chancery Lane. That's the naked truth, ladies—savin' your presence——"

"Pray who are you, my good man?" demanded the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery: "for you seem to take so deep an interest in everything which concerns my dear friend Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"I do suspect he's what's called a sheriff's-officer," whispered Lady Brunel.

"I should faint at the bare notion," shrieked the elderly lady who a minute ago had pretended to whimper in commiseration of Mrs. Fitzherbert's misfortunes. "Pray put me out of suspense at once, and ask that dreadful man what he really is."

"Who are you?" demanded Lady Brunel, addressing the query in a somewhat sharp and imperious tone to Mr. Crimp,

"I'm the bailiff what's arrested Mrs. Fitzherbert," was the answer; "and it's out of sheer good natur' and 'cos I pities her case that I've gone the rounds of her friends to see what they'll do for her."

"Ah! then you have been elsewhere this morning on Mrs. Fitsherbert's behalf?" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess interrogatively.

"Indeed I have, may it please your ladyship—and with no success at all," said Crimp, wondering how much longer it would be ere the expected loan was forthcoming.

"Pray where have you been, my man?" asked Lady Brunel; and every head was now stretched forward with eager curiosity to enable the ear to catch every syllable of Crimp's reply whatever it might be.

"I went fust to Lady Singleton—next to the Marchioness of Banbury—and now I'm here," he said, in a measured manner: "and I hope and expect that I've got the right sow by the tail at last."

"What *does* the fellow mean?" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, suddenly throwing off the mask of mildness and assuming a demeanour full of indignation. "But it is just like the insufferable impertinence of Mrs. Fitzherbert to send such a coarse vulgarian on her beggarly messages."

"She's fallen from her pedestal at last!" ejaculated Lady Brunel.

"And she will never remount it again," observed the elderly lady who was whimpering at one moment, fainting the next, and now chuckling over the ruin of a fellow-creature.

"Well, this *is* a catastrophe!" exclaimed one of the young ladies.

"She who only a few weeks ago was so much envied!" observed another Honourable Miss.

"And with whom any of us would have so cheerfully changed places!" cried a third.

"But it is just what we all expected," remarked Lady Brunel; "and indeed what Mrs. Fitzherbert herself most richly deserves."

"Her pride has been detestable!" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess, tossing her head indignantly.

"And then her character—her example—positive contamination!" cried Lady Brunel. "I hope God will forgive me for having ever allowed my daughters to speak to such a creature."

"You may go, fellow!" observed the Dowager-Countess, flinging the intimation at poor Crimp with that sovereign insolence of which a member of England's arrogant aristocracy is alone capable.

And, more utterly crest-fallen than ever, the poor devil slunk out of the splendid mansion as if he had been detected in the commission of a theft. He only breathed freely when, safely ensconced once more in the hackney-coach, he was borne out of sight of the patrician palace in which so flagrant a

specimen of aristrocratic heartlessness had been added to his experiences of human life.

And now, while Lady Singleton and Miss Jukes were discussing a succulent lunch and pouring into each other's bosom certain little confidences by no means corroborative of their good morals,—while, in the second place the sanctified-looking Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury was toying with one of her handsome pages on the drawing-room sofa,—and while, in the third place, the old Countess of Montgomery and her lady companions were commenting, with a true enjoyment and a lively zest, upon the downfall of Mrs. Fitzherbert and laughing at the success with which they drew Mr. Crimp out and gleaned from him all those particulars that now furnished food for so much pleasant discussion,—while such, we say, were the proceedings in the several houses visited that day by the bailiff, this individual himself was returning, melancholy and dispirited, to the almost deserted dwelling of Mrs. Fitzherbert.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when he alighted from the hackney-coach at the termination of his fruitless mission. On ascending to the apartment where he had left Mrs. Fitzherbert in the custody of his man Jack, he found the unhappy lady pacing the room in a condition of the most nervous suspense, while his follower was seated near the fire, contemplating the blazing coals with an air of indifference to all beside.

The failure of Mr. Crimp's errand was instaneously read by Mrs. Fitzherbert in his face: and, clasping her hands together, she fell upon her knees, exclaiming with frantic wildness, "Oh! do not take me to prison—I implore you not to drag me hence! Grant me a few days' license——"

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Nathan Crimp: "you ain't a-going to quod—o'ny to my lock-up house."

"But that is almost as bad as a prison!" she exclaimed, with a rending emphasis in her words and despair in her looks.

"Well, ma'am, I'll make yer as comfortable as I can: but there you must go—and at vunce too. None of your friends won't do nuffin for you——"

"Friends, indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert bitterly, as she rose from her suppliant posture. "The unfortunate have no friends: on the contrary, I dare believe that many and many a heart, lately so full of envious or jealous feelings, will now rejoice at my downfall! Ah! I see by your looks that such is already the case," she cried, reading in the expression of the bailiff's countenance the confirmation of her most galling fears. "But I will not now shrink from making one more trial of *love* and *friendship*," she added, with increasing bitterness of tone and excitement of manner; "and this last experiment shall be tested from the lock-up-house, which is the threshold of the debtor's gaol!"

"Well, ma'am, what have you resolved upon?" inquired Mr. Crimp, who, as the reader may have seen, did not possess a bad heart, although the very nature of his calling had rendered selfishness the prominent feature in his character.

"I have resolved upon accompanying you forthwith," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now speaking with the firmness of desperation, while her lips were as colourless as her cheeks: "I have also determined upon allowing forty-eight hours to elapse without making another effort to procure my liberation—so that the whole metropolis may learn what has happened, and thus have leisure to comment upon the generosity, manliness, and affection of him who permits all this to take place. Yes—forty-eight hours shall elapse in that manner," she cried, with a virulent bitterness in her tone and a glare of frenzy in her eyes; "and then, if no notice be taken of me in a certain quarter—then, I say, I will send and demand as a right what I never would have accepted, much less besought, as a boon."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Fitzherbert repaired to her own chamber; and, while Crimp waited outside in the passage to assure himself that she did not give him the slip, the once courted and almost worshipped lady performed her unassisted toilette.

No tears now traced their pearly path adown her cheeks; her eyes seemed to burn with the light of frenzy, and her face was flushed with the hectic glow of fever. The pulsations of her heart were rapid and abrupt:—the heavings of her bosom proved this. There was something awful about her—as if she had reached that crisis of her destiny when suicide was an alternative as conspicuous to her view as the chance of redemption from her difficulties. In her brain was a sensation of hurry and confusion: she felt as never before she had felt, either in the head or in the heart!

At length her toilette was completed; and apparelled in her most unpretending garb, she issued forth from her chamber. In her purse there were a few shillings: in a little casket there were a few jewels. But all her most precious gems, as well as her plate and other valuables, were already in pledge:—and thus was it that, standing upon the very verge of pauperism—friendless and alone—unattended by even a domestic, and unaccompanied by even such sympathy as a hired abigail might have bestowed—the once brilliant and magnificent Mrs. Fitzherbert entered the hackney-coach and was driven off to the sponging-house in Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER CLXVII.

THE MONSTER-MAN.

AGAIN have we a scene of horror to depict: once more must we seek the churchyard by night, when the moon is shining pure and cold and the silver stars spangle the deep blue vault of heaven.

'Twas twelve o'clock—midnight,—that hour when even the revellers over the wine-cup look at each other to imply that the moment for breaking up the orgie is at hand,—when the daughter of crime begins to think it fruitless to pace the street any longer or later that night, and turns her weary steps towards the abode of pollution which she denominates her "home,"—when the desperate suicide seeks the bridge from which the fatal plunge may be made without the fear of molestation at such an hour,—when the convict in the doomed cell of Newgate counts the strokes of Saint Sepulchre's clock and calculates with a heavy, Oh! so heavy a heart, that he has only eight hours more to live,—when the Cabinet Minister rises from the table in his private office where he has been concocting some fresh invasion upon the popular rights and some new element of wealth, monopoly, or influence for the greedy, griping, heartless aristocracy,—when the gambler is just beginning to feel excited with the ruinous play which he proposes to

continue until daybreak,—when the gorged alderman turns and moans upon a couch which, though of down, is made comfortless by indigestion, and when the poor starving wretch tosses in his miserable garret whence famine repels even the advance of that slumber which costs nothing,—when the lean, pining, perishing needlewoman snuffs her solitary candle and sighs over the work which she dares not lay aside until she shall have pushed her heart-breaking toils farther and deeper still into the cold, cold night,—when the burglar steals abroad, with pistols and crape-mask, skeleton-keys and dark lantern, to do his dangerous, desperate work,—when music resounds through the saloons of rank, wealth, and fashion, and the roseate floods of luxury gush forth from the joints in gilded shutters and between the folds of velvet curtains,—when in attics, and cellars, and on the steps of street-doors, and in ths entrances of courts, and under the dry arches of bridges and coal-wharfs, are gathered those wretched outcasts of society and those innumerable beings whom monopoly in all its detestable shapes excludes from the great community of labour,—and when, too, murder bares its red right hand and mingles its voice of terror with the dull moaning of the night-wind,—at this hour was it that the monster-man entered one of the churchyards in the north-western suburb of London.

He was clad in that rough sailor-garb which he wore when last we beheld him at his diabolical work;—and beneath his jacket he carried the implement that was so necessary to him in his nocturnal occupation.

On entering the churchyard he paused—he leant against the gate over which he had just clambered—and dropping the shovel from under his rough coat, he covered his countenance with his hands and groaned aloud in mortal agony.

"O God! what have I done that I should thus be made the sport of an infernal hallucination—the victim of a horrible night-mare? But is it true—Oh! is it true that like a jackall I tear open the graves of the dead, and like a vampyre I prey upon them? Yes—it is no dream—no delusion: 'tis a hideous, horrible, damnable reality—and even now—now—I feel the accursed influence creeping over me! Oh! it comes—it comes, slow and chilling at first, like the gradual coiling of a slimy snake around the limbs;—and now it seems to burn on the surface of my flesh and tingle in my veins, as the sensation gains upon me! Oh! spare me—spare me," exclaimed the wretched man, throwing up his arms in despair: "spare me—spare me!" he cried, in a rending voice, as he stretched out his hands towards the moon that shone like a crescent of silver. "But what can I do?—how can I combat against my destiny? It is my fate which I am obeying: like Cain am I stricken—like Judas am I doomed—like the Wandering Jew am I cursed! And yet what evil have I done? Cain murdered his brother Abel: never, never have I shed a drop of human blood at all! Judas betrayed his Redeemer for thirty pieces of silver: but never did I wrong a friend! The Wandering Jew struck Christ when fainting beneath the weight of his cross as He bore it to Mount Calvary: but I never disavowed my Saviour—never forgot to pray to him night and morning! Wherefore, then, am I doomed?—wherefore am I fated?—wherefore am I cursed? Oh! it is not God who has fastened his ban upon me: it is the world that has made me an outcast! I am not the victim of heaven's wrath—but of society's injustice: I am not a sacrifice to the vengeance of Providence—but to the tyranny of Man! I asked for work—and the demand was vain: I sought to eat the bread of industry—but starvation made its gaunt home beneath my roof. I was torn away by ruthless tyrants from all whom I loved and held dear: and God only knows all that I have since endured—all that I have since become! The thought drives me mad—mad—mad! Wife, where art thou? In the cold, silent grave repose thy remains. Children, where are ye? Oh! that some kind spirit would waft the answer to mine ears: for I have sought ye everywhere, my poor children—my beloved babes—and I can find ye not! No wonder, then, that I am mad—furiously mad—insanely, rabidly, raving mad!"

And as the miserable wretch yelled forth these last words, he tore his hair—beat his breast violently—and dashed his open palms with all his might against his forehead as if he sought to break in the wall of his brain.

There were houses near enough for him to have been overheard; but perhaps the inmates slept soundly—or peradventure those whom the cries disturbed might have deemed them to emanate from the tipsy folly of some drunkard reeling home.

The bat swept over the head of the monster-man—the owl hooted from the belfry of the church—and the raven croaked from the adjacent tree. Then all was still—all was silent:—and the unhappy being leant against the gate—statue-like—motionless.

Suddenly the influence which he had already felt creeping over him,—that indomitable, irresistible influence which the monster-man regarded as his fate—his doom—the spell that urged him on to the accomplishment of a fearful destiny,—this mysterious and scarcely comprehensible influence it was which now seized upon him as if it were an enormous hand of iron that clutched him—made him spring with an abrupt start from his reverie of profoundly absorbing woe—and endowed him with all the horrible vitality which was to concentrate its energies to the accomplishment of an infernal task.

With a yell of despair,—for the miserable being felt and comprehended all the power and all the tendency of that influence which he could not resist, revolting and loathsome though it were,—he picked up his spade—sprang on to the nearest tomb—and thence began to pass from monument to monument and stone to stone in the same way as on the former occasion.

Frequently he stopped and listened: sometimes he lay down upon the flat stone of tumular masonry—and then his attention would be breathless as his terror was appalling. The perspiration would break out all over him: bathed in the sweat of his anguish, his limbs would nevertheless quiver and tremble as if with an icy chilliness. His hair would stand on end—his eyes would glare with the light of frenzy through the silver flood which the moon sent forth to fill the atmosphere. But when the cause of alarm—or perhaps, in some instances, the fancied cause—had passed, how sudden would prove the relief experienced by the unhappy wretch! The breath would come freely again all in a moment

—the limbs would recover their power—the blood would circulate naturally—and the perspiration would seem to evaporate instantaneously. Then onward would he go—proceeding from tomb to tomb as before,—now pausing to examine the ground between—then straining his eyes to examine the appearance of some grave in the distance,—now giving vent to a sudden feeling of anguish in profound sobs—then remaining dumb, as if all his senses, all his faculties were for the time absorbed in that influence which shed its mysterious and appalling spells upon him!

Oh! surely, surely the doom of that monster-man was very terrible!—surely he was some accursed being fulfilling a destiny of no common order!

But let us follow him now, as he pursues his way from one tumular elevation to another.

The moon is shining in all her silver purity—the stars are keeping company with the vestal of the night. Into the strongest relief are thrown the salient features of the scene: into the darkest gloom are the shades flung. This striking contrast of the argentine brilliancy and sombre depth is ever inseparable from a night thus splendidly moonlit;—and, amidst the light, the silence, and the picturesque aspect of the whole scene, the dark form of that man moving from grave-stone to grave-stone has something ominous in its appearance.

But, Ah! now he pauses again: and this time 'tis not to listen—'tis not in terror. No—'tis because he distinguishes a new-made grave—and he looks well to the nature of the intervening objects to assure himself how he may approach it in security.

As on the former occasion, he moves cautiously from tomb to tomb until he is close up to the verge of the mound so recently raised. It stood within a foot of a low tumular structure, the sides of which were of brick-work supporting a large stone horizontally placed and whereon an inscription was engraved. Lying flat and with his face downward upon this monument, the midnight desecrator of churchyards was enabled to grope with his hands all about the immediate vicinage of the newly-made grave,—and at length finding a wire, for which he was evidently searching, he fingered it so delicately as to prevent the slightest vibration, and then clipped it asunder with the pair of scissors which he invariably carried about his person.

This being done, he fearlessly descended from the neighbouring tomb—detached a large portion of the wire—threw the piece away—and then began to hollow out the grave to which an occupant had so recently been assigned.

It now appeared as if an infernal energy inspired him. Like Samson when pulling down the edifice upon his own head and the head of his persecutors, the monster-man seemed to acquire from some mysterious and superhuman source an amount of strength equivalent to the task which he had in hand.

The perspiration poured off him—his garments were almost saturated with the moisture. As the moonlight streamed upon his countenance, the veins upon his brow appeared like knotted cords beneath his skin. Straining at every nerve—sweating at ever pore—the monster-man pursued his toil, shovelling up the earth with incredible speed, and all the while swayed by a mortal terror lest he should be detected in the horrible work!

At length the coffin was reached—the spade struck upon the lid—and the sound was as hollow as if the dead inside had spoken in sepulchral tones. A little more earth to shovel out—and then the way was cleared for the raising of the coffin. This was speedily accomplished;—and when the long, narrow, sinister-shaped thing lay upon the mound of soil that had been thrown out, the monster-man forced off the lid with his spade. This was the work of a few moments: then the winding-sheet was torn away—and upon the marble countenance of an elderly man did the moonlight pour its silver flood.

Yes—the corpse was that of a man long past the prime of life, and whose appearance must have been venerable during his latter years. He had not been dead many days—nor buried many hours: indeed, he looked as if he were but serenely sleeping—for as yet there was nothing loathsome in the aspect of the corpse.

For a few moments—nay, for upwards of a minute—did the monster-man gaze intently upon the face of the dead: and then a desperate struggle seemed suddenly to arise within his own breast—increasing all in an instant to a frightful pitch, as the sea when the squall sweeps over it is lashed up into surging billows quick as the eye can wink.

Was he battling with the wild hurricane of some passion claiming the mastery over him?—was he fighting against some ferocious craving which was rapidly acquiring strength and power?—was he warring with some demoniac instinct from which all his better feelings revolted? Yes—it must have been so: for he writhed fearfully—he twisted his form about as if it were a huge piece of rope that was thus undulating—he seemed like a piece cut out of the middle of a monstrous snake, and in which the vitality still manifested itself by torturing convulsions. Then dreadful moans escaped him, mingled with suffocating sobs: then he dashed his hands violently against his brows—then he clenched his fingers in his hair.

But the infernal passion gained upon him—the hellish influence was rapidly asserting its complete mastery. One desperate struggle more—one last tremendous effort to fling off the serpent-coils that were closing in around him,—one final attempt to breathe a prayer,—and then——

—— Oh! then all that followed was hideous and horrible in the extreme: for suddenly seizing upon the spade which lay at his feet, the monster-man raised it savagely—brandished it ferociously—and then began to mutilate the corpse with a spite as diabolical and a malignity as infernal as if he were a fiend avenging his own fall upon the human race!

And now the wretch gnashed his teeth—and ground them together—and sucked his lips, which were parched with a burning thirst: then his tongue lolled out, and the foam gathered round his mouth, becoming bloody in a short time with the cracking of those lips so painfully parched. And the man's eyes glowered like those of a demon,—yes, glowered and glared like red-hot cinders set in those sockets where eyes were wont to be!

And still he continued to hack and hew the corpse: still he pursued the infernal pastime. His

loathing and repugnance had all disappeared—or rather, had changed into a delirious pleasure and a maddening delight at the hellish game which he was thus playing. Then, so soon as he was tired of mutilating the body with the spade, he threw the implement from him—he stooped down—and with his hands did he tear away the lacerated flesh from the bones of the corpse!

Oh! it was a damnable pastime—an infernal sport! And the wretch chuckled heartily and laughed madly the while.

At length he desisted from this wanton, meaningless, and incomprehensible mutilation of the dead; and, all his feelings suddenly undergoing a tremendous reaction, he became a prey to mortal terror—unnerved—dispirited—robbed of all his energies—with a sensation as if the tide of life itself were ebbing away. Then he sank down in a state of total unconsciousness by the side of the corpse which he had torn from its coffin and so cruelly mangled.

For nearly two hours did this utter prostration last,—two mortal hours during which the man remained in a deep trance, giving not the slightest sign of life. Infuriate monster as he had that night proved himself to be, a child might now have slain him, so helpless and so insensible was he!

But all on a sudden—as if a cannon had been fired close by his ear, or as if the rod of a most powerful galvanic battery had been applied to him—he started up. Consciousness returned not gradually—but with a marvellous abruptness: life flowed not back by gradient ripples into his heart, but poured in with a sudden volume that sent all the auxiliary rills coursing with lightning speed through the veins.

"O God! is it possible?—have I done it again?' he cried—or rather shrieked forth in his anguish, as his eyes, the moment they opened once more, encountered the mangled corpse—the violated coffin—the rent winding-sheet—the open grave—and all the ghastly features of the place which he had made the scene of his infernal revelry.

For a few instants he stood gazing upon the mutilated dead—appalled at the hideous evidences of his own demoniac conduct: then, seized with a sudden terror he turned to fly from the spot. But, forgetting how ticklish was the ground on which he trod, he utterly neglected his wonted precaution of walking upon the tombstones.

The result of this obliviousness on his part was speedily made manifest: for scarcely had he rushed away from the immediate vicinage of the open grave and the mangled corpse, when he trod upon the very wire a portion of which he had ere now cut so cautiously away.

There was an immediate explosion of the spring-gun with which that wire had connexion;—and a yell of agony burst from the lips of the monster-man as he received a dozen shot-wounds in various parts of his body.

An alarm was instantaneously raised in the neighbouring houses: lights were speedily seen to gleam at the windows and move about in those dwellings—and men's voices were heard calling to each other, as neighbour demanded of neighbour whether he had caught the ominous sound of the spring-gun and would hasten in search of the midnight desecrator of graves.

In a few minutes a dozen persons were hastening from different directions to the churchyard; and amongst the tombs did they unhesitatingly plunge, there being no longer any danger from the spring-gun as its contents were discharged. Guided by the moon-light, they soon discovered the spot where the grave had been desecrated and the corpse mangled: but vainly did they search for the miscreant who had accomplished the diabolical work.

There were fresh marks of blood near the open grave: those marks were traced to a distance of several yards—and on reaching the pathway which intersected the cemetery they were suddenly lost altogether.

The individuals engaged in this research separated in all directions to hunt down the wretch who had so long been carrying on this diabolical game, but who now appeared likely to fall into the hands of justice at last. It was evident from the blood-stains that he had been severely wounded: and the inference was therefore natural that his arrest must speedily follow.

But after beating about all the vicinage of the churchyard for upwards of an hour—after scrutinizing every nook and corner which the searchers could possibly think of—they found all their endeavours fruitless and all their hopes baffled.

The monster-man had escaped—leaving the open grave, the mangled corpse, and the shovel which he had used as dreadful evidences of his presence in that quarter: while the discharged spring-gun and the useless search seemed to afford confirmation for many a gossip's tale respecting the horrors and mysteries of Vampyrism!

CHAPTER CLXVIII.

THE PRINCE AND THE SHERIFF'S OFFICER.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, on the second day after the arrest of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was seated alone in his private apartment, busily engaged in perusing a long letter which he had received from a friend whom he had sent over to Germany for the special purpose of making a true and faithful report on the personal appearance and intellectual qualities of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

His Royal Highness was attired in his morning-gown, a pair of loose breeches, stockings without garters, and slippers; and he was half-reclining in an indolent manner in an arm-chair near the fire, reading with the profoundest interest the document which he had just received from his emissary to Germany.

"Oh! good teeth," he murmured to himself: "well, I am glad of that! If there be one feature more lovely than another, it is the teeth. A beautiful face is spoiled by indifferent teeth. Give me a plain woman with good teeth, in preference to a charming creature with bad teeth. Ah! poor Octavia Clarendon—what rows of pearls had *she!* But Pauline too—yes, Miss Pauline has teeth equally fine. And I have lost sight of those girls entirely lately. Ever since that accursed masquerade affair—or rather the interruption at Mrs. Brace's house—I seem to have abandoned all idea of possessing Pauline. But, by Jove! it is only a *seeming* on my part: for now that some accident or another has recalled her image so vividly to my

mind, I feel a sudden resuscitation of those desires which her charming appearance as the Flower Girl engendered in my soul. Ah! when the lustre of that masquerade-scene lighted her form in all its splendour, how glorious was the symmetry of that shape—how stainless the arms and bosom—how full of elegance every attitude! On my soul, Pauline is lovelier and more desirable than her sister—at least now that I have possessed her sister and that I long to possess herself! I cannot fix my mental vision upon Pauline's charms without being intoxicated with the halo of beauty and the perfume of love which seem to float around her. But, oh! to hear that musical voice of her's escape in joyous murmurs of pleasure through lips red as coral and moist with voluptuousness,—to behold those blue eyes half closing in the ecstacy of passion's transport,—to feel her exquisite form vibrating with all the abandonment of a sensuous suppleness,—Oh! this were to be inundated with the bliss of paradise!"

Then, closing his eyes and throwing back his head, the royal voluptuary gave himself up altogether to the delicious flood of ideas which the powers of an imagination so licentiously fervid had conjured up;—and thus for a few minutes did he remain gloating on the picture which represented the innocent and beauteous Pauline succumbing to his desires and abandoning herself with a kindred ardour to his embraces.

But the circumstance of his emissary's document falling from his hand aroused him from that voluptuous dream; and, picking up the paper, he proceeded to scan and comment upon its contents.

"Well, my future wife possesses good teeth—and I have already said that I am glad of that '*She is twenty-five years old*:' just the age that I like

when the lady herself is handsome. '*Her stature is middling: her bust good.*' I wish she was tall—tall and queen-like, as Georgiana,—or tall and graceful, as Pauline. Ah! Pauline—Pauline! how does thine image keep recurring to my thoughts! But let me see what more my correspondent tells me of my future wife? '*Her person is altogether pleasing.*' Why—that's entirely a matter of taste! For my part, I like women whose charms are matured and full, but without the least approach to coarseness. Let their beauties once verge upon coarseness, and I have done with them! '*Her accomplishments are numerous and exquisite.*' Bah! with what accomplishments can this German princess be endowed that shall even equal those of our English ladies? But because she *is* a princess, she must of course be paraded as a goddess of perfection. Well, so be it: 'tis a part of the humbug by which all royal personages profit! Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, Royal Dukes and Duchesses, must be represented as deities: or else King-worship would soon become extinct! And now what does my correspondent tell me next? That my future wife's '*appearance at Court is majestic.*' Pshaw! I won't believe it! Majestic, indeed—with a middling stature! No—no: if he had said '*elegant*' and '*graceful,*' well and good. There can be nothing *majestic* in her. A short woman only looks ridiculous when dressed up in the gaud and finery of a queen or princess. If once the phrase '*little Queen,*' or '*little Princess*' should come into vogue, and be applied to full-blown women instead of mere girls, the fact must be taken as a sign of the times—a proof, indeed, that Royalty is at a discount. But never mind!—as I have often said before, the monarchical system will last my time out—and damn all the consequences! Ah! what have we next in this letter? '*The manner of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline, is characterised by sweetness, condescension, and affability.*' She will need all her sweetness of temper to put up with my intrigues and infidelities, I can tell her! '*Her eyes are blue, and full of intelligence.*' Yes—and Pauline's eyes are blue—and in their delicious depths young Cupid dwells! Blue—deep blue—and rolling with a softly sensuous languor: those are Pauline's eyes! And now what is the next detail in my correspondent's missive? '*The Princess's countenance is highly animated.*' Never was description more vague! Animated with what? There is the countenance of Eleanor of Desborough that breathes desire in every lineament: there is the countenance of Georgiana of Devonshire, that tells the tale of delicious wantonness in every feature. Then, too, there is the lovely Rose Foster, whose face reflects all the virginal purity of her soul;—and there is Pauline's countenance again, in which a woman's dignity mingles with the expression of the amorous temperament which that dignity itself more than half subdues. Well, now, all this is animation;—and I'll be bound that my future wife possesses no animation so charming as any one of those faces which are uppermost in my memory. Ah! and of the four beauties whom I have named, *one* only has yielded—one only blessed me with her love! The three others have all eluded my pursuit! Eleanor of Desborough abhors me: Rose Foster fears me; Pauline Clarendon despises me! And yet, if I had not been been a fool, in every instance should I have triumphed. A little more persecution—and Eleanor must have been defeated some how or another: a little more audacity with Rose, on one of the occasions when she was in my power—and her virginity would have been rifled;—a little more perseverance with regard to Pauline, instead of losing sight of her altogether since the night of the masquerade—and who knows but that success would have awaited me in that quarter likewise? By heavens! I will renew my endeavours after all three! Yes—the haughty but impassioned and glowing Eleanor of Desborough shall be mine! I told her that the love with which she had inspired me, was changed into hatred;—I told her *this* on the occasion when Mrs. Fitzherbert burst upon our interview and marred my aim:—but, oh! who could long cherish a feeling of hatred against that splendid creature, with her olive complexion, her glorious eyes so full of fire, and her superb form so pre-eminently characterised by dignity, grace, and love! Yes—and Rose Foster—the sweet, innocent, timid maiden—shall be mine likewise, even if I have to send to the extremities of the earth to find her out! Last—but not least—oh! no, not least—the divine Pauline shall bless my arms;—and then no oriental Sultan will have revelled in beauties more exquisite than these!"

Again did the Prince of Wales pause to gloat in imagination over the picture which he was thus conjuring up, and to feast his libidinous fancy upon the charms which he recalled in vivid detail to his memory.

"But once again," he murmured at length, starting at the same time from the voluptuous reverie in which he was steeping his senses—"once again let me turn my attention to this document which I have received from Germany. Nevertheless, surely it must be a bad omen for my approaching marriage, when I can think *so little* upon her who is to become my wife, and *so much* upon others whom I wish to enjoy as mistresses! Of a verity, the whole portraiture of the Princess Caroline, even with the colouring which my emissary has given to it, fascinates me not mightily. There are a few good details—but many unsatisfactory ones. '*Exquisite accomplishments*' may mean nothing more than drawing-room frivolities and courtly inanities: '*sweetness of manner*' conveys the irresistible idea of silliness and want of dignity. But what says my correspondent of her dress? Oh! '*always evincing the most admirable taste.*' Vague and inconclusive! But her hair? '*Of a light auburn—profuse—and generally worn in a style of simple elegance.*' If any human being can tell whether this means in bands or ringlets—in bows or frizzed—then I'll consent to be stigmatized as the greatest fool in Christendom! Ah! I already experience a secret loathing—an unaccountable aversion—for this German Princess who has been selected as my future wife. The feeling amounts to a presentiment which I cannot resist—a spell which fixes itself insuperably upon me—a superstition which I cannot shake off. Oh! if I who have plucked the fairest flowers in beauty's garden and crowned myself with the brightest gems won from the galaxy of female fashion,—if I who have conquered so often and been baffled so seldom, and to whom the coldest chastity has suddenly become changed into the warmest passion and the sternest prudery into the most yielding

softness,—if such a man as I—the first gentleman in Europe as well as the most envied heir to a throne in the whole world,—if I, in a word, am to be sacrificed to a coarse, silly-minded, common-looking creature—by the living God! all Princess though she be, and doubly Princess though she will become through her alliance with me, I will treat her worse than the veriest scullion in my kitchen—I will punish her bitterly, bitterly, for that presumption which prompted her to breathe the fatal '*Yes*' when she was asked whether she would marry the Prince of Wales!"

During the latter portion of these musings, his Royal Highness rose from his seat and paced the room with an excitement which was also evidenced in the loud tone to which his voice rapidly swelled and the earnest gesticulations that he made. Nor could anything exceed the haughty arrogance and the superb complaisance with which he spoke of himself as *the first gentleman in Europe*.

Having brought his denunciatory tirade to a conclusion, he returned to his seat and continued the perusal of the letter which he still held in his hand. For a few moments he read on with comparative coolness: but suddenly he started and held the document more closely to his eyes as if there were a possibility of misconception relative to some particular passage.

But, no: he had read aright—and thus the latter portion of the correspondence ran:—

"Your Royal Highness honoured me with a mission of the most secret and sacred character; and I set forth with the determination to perform my duty to the utmost of my power. That resolution remains unaltered. My mission properly divided itself into two objects: the first was to report concerning the personal appearance, accomplishments, and manners of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick;—and the second was to glean as much information as possible respecting her private character, pursuits, &c., and especially as to whether her conduct had in anywise or at any time afforded grounds for scandalous whispering. It is this latter, and by far the least agreeable portion, of my task that I now proceed to accomplish.

"I have not the slightest doubt that her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline possesses every virtue. Her chastity is unquestionable: her propriety of conduct is beyond all question. In fact, the most inveterate scandal-mongers and purveyors of tittle-tattle have never dared to whisper a syllable prejudicial to the reputation of her Highness. But whether it be, or be not, a crime in the eyes of your Royal Highness, that the Princess has loved—nay, *still loves*—another, is a point which I dare not venture to speculate upon. I am here to tell the truth,—charged by your Royal Highness with a mission of secrecy;—and it therefore remains for me only to report such particulars as I have succeeded in gleaning.

"Her Serene Highness the Princess has undoubtedly formed an attachment for the Baron Bergami. This nobleman belongs to a poor but ancient family; and nothing of all that this family once possessed, remains to the Baron, except the titled name. He is a mere youth—remarkably handsome—and recently filled the post of secretary to the diplomatic agent for the Court of Prussia. But the instant it was known that negotiations had been opened between the British Minister and the Court of Brunswick, relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness to your Royal Highness, the Baron of Bergami suddenly disappeared. It is supposed that he was immediately despatched to fill some other appointment elsewhere.

"The love of the Princess for this youth is full of the most touching romance. They never spoke to each other in their lives. It was in the ducal chapel that the handsome Bergami first attracted the notice of her Highness; and her modest beauty at the same time made a deep impression upon his heart. This happened about eighteen months ago; and ever since (until Bergami quitted the State a few weeks back) was he a constant attendant in the ducal chapel. It would seem that the sentiment of love enables even the most innocent and artless woman to dive quickly and accurately into the depths of that mind which she is interested in probing: nor less can love speak by the eyes—and the language which those eloquent orbs express is universally comprehended without variation of idiom. Thus was it, then, that in due time the Princess read the secret of Bergami's soul—while he made a similar discovery with regard to the royal lady herself. Then tender looks were exchanged; and once or twice her Serene Highness dropped a flower from the ducal pew, as if by accident—but which the youthful adorer failed not to pick up and place next to his heart. The proof of homage and devotion which he gave in return consisted of odes and lyrics, sent anonymously to the principal lady-in-waiting upon her Highness; and this said lady-in-waiting fancied that they were addressed by some love-sick swain to herself. In the fulness of her vanity, she invariably showed them to the Princess, who failed not to comprehend from whom they came and for whose special perusal they were intended. Couched in terms the most respectful and in verse the most fluent and harmonious, these lyrics breathed as fervid a soul of love as that which Petrarch poured forth in immortal sonnets to the charming and worshipped Laura.

"And to those innocent exchanges of love's testimonials was the correspondence of her Serene Highness and Bergami limited. They never spoke to each other, save by the eyes: they never were near enough to each other to exchange a whispered vow or the slightest touch of hands. But in her artlessness, the Princess confessed to two or three lady-friends this singularly romantic passion which she experienced and had inspired; and those ladies whispered the tale to *their* friends. It eventually reached the ears of her Highness's august parents; and although they attached but little importance, and indeed scarcely any credence, to the matter, it was nevertheless deemed only proper and prudent to obtain from the Prussian Court an order for the removal of Bergami to another State.

"Such are the facts of this singular love-passage in the life of her Serene Highness; and my informant assures me that her Highness cherishes with a species of religious fervour the image of the handsome youth in her bosom. That I can fully rely upon my informant as an authority in this matter, your Royal Highness may judge from the fact that the said informant is one of the lady-friends enjoying the confidence of the Princess; and that having become my mistress, she freely and cheerfully unbosoms all her secrets to my ear."

Such was the concluding passage in the important document which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had that day received from his emissary in Germany. There was nothing in the romantic tale which it contained, to furnish him with a pretext for breaking off the contemplated match with the Princess Caroline: in fact, the whole thing was so childish that its truth could scarcely be admitted by serious-minded persons, when it came to be considered that her Serene Highness was not a girl of fifteen or sixteen, but a woman of twenty-five. Moreover, the Prince of Wales said to himself, "If I don't marry this German creature, my blessed parents and their equally agreeable Minister will only be looking out for another of the same breed; and I may go farther and fare worse."

Having thus philosophically made up his mind to let the matrimonial affair take its course, the Prince was on the point of throwing the letter

into the fire, when it suddenly flashed to his brain that it might prove useful hereafter in some way or another.

"Who knows what purpose it may serve?" he muttered to himself.

And as he proceeded to secure the document in his desk, the operation reminded him of how his most valuable and important papers had been abstracted by the Amazon, and how they were still retained in her possession until the conditions which she had imposed upon his Royal Highness were fulfilled.

"I will be revenged upon that woman, by heaven!" he exclaimed aloud, and he dashed his clenched fist upon the lid of the desk. "Once let me be out of her power, and we shall see who is the more powerful—the heir-apparent to the British throne, or Jack Rann's blowen converted into Lady Lade!"

Scarcely had the Prince made this reflection, when Germain entered the room with a letter, which he handed to his royal master. He then retreated to the vicinage of the door, where he stood to await the reply that was desired.

The heir-apparent instantaneously recognised the fluent writing of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and with a trembling hand he opened the missive, the contents of which ran as follow:—

"Circumstances of the most distressing and humiliating character could alone induce me to ask you for assistance. I do not appeal to you as a wife to a husband—although I *have* the right to do so: I do not appeal to you as a friend to a friend, because all kindly feeling on your part towards me is extinct;—and I do not appeal to you as a mistress to her lover, because I never looked upon myself in any less honourable light than that of your spouse. No: in none of those capacities do I appeal to you—although it was originally my intention to put both *love* and *friendship* to a last test. But I request you, on the score of past reminiscences and all that has ever taken place between us, to see the bearer of this letter and satisfy him in such a manner that I may be released forthwith from my present cruel embarrassment."

The note was without date or signature: but the beautiful handwriting would have been unmistakable, even if the tender pathos of the language had touched no responsive chord in the heart of the Prince of Wales. He knew, then, that the missive was from Mrs. Fitzherbert: but he was altogether ignorant of the calamities which had befallen her;—and it was as much through curiosity to be enlightened in this respect, as from any feeling of a more praiseworthy nature, that he bade Germain introduce to his presence the bearer of the letter.

The valet bowed and retired;—and in a few minutes Mr. Nathan Crimp was ushered into the royal voluptuary's private apartment.

But the sheriff's-officer's external appearance had undergone as signal a change as copious ablutions, clean linen, the Sunday apparel, and a fine display of jewellery could possibly accomplish with regard to it. In fact, Mr. Crimp had made himself as smart as possible; and although it would have been well if he had looked a trifle less greasy about the hair and face, and likewise if he had removed the black cornices from his nails or at all events worn gloves, there nevertheless certainly was a great improvement in the personal appearance of Mr. Nathan Crimp.

Germain retired as soon as he had introduced this individual; and the Prince, having scanned him with a hasty but searching glance, demanded in a somewhat imperious tone, "Where is Mrs. Fitzherbert?—and who the devil are you?"

"Please your Royal Highness," returned Mr. Crimp, with a low bow and a scrape of the left foot, "the lady's in lavendar, and I'm the you know what—savin' your Royal Highness's presence."

"Damn the presence!" cried the Prince, impatiently. "What do you mean me to understand, man? Is Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lock-up house?—and are you a bailiff?"

"Please your Royal Highness, the lady's safe in my lock-up, as you have just observed: but I ain't a hordinary bum-baily—I'm the officer his-self."

"Ah! now I comprehend," said the Prince, throwing himself back into the arm-chair whence he had risen: then, taking a tooth-pick, he crossed one leg over another in a leisurely manner, and seemed to reflect for nearly a minute. "Well, and how much is she locked up for?" he at length demanded, in a tone which now appeared to be expressive of very great indifference indeed.

"Two thousand and odd guineas, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Crimp.

"Zounds!" ejaculated the Prince, tossing the tooth-pick into the fire. "And what does she want me to do?"

"Pay it, I suppose," was Mr. Nathan Crimp's very natural though somewhat blunt explanation.

"May I be damned——I mean may I be hanged!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, correcting himself, "if I can do anything of the kind. Come now, Mr. What's-your-name——"

"Crimp—Nathan Crimp—at your Royal Highness's service," interjected the bailiff, with another low bow.

"Well, Mr. Crimp, then," continued the Prince, in a tone of half-superciliousness and half-command,—"I know that all gentlemen of your fraternity are not only rich as Crœsus, but likewise ever ready to advance your coin at good interest. You will therefore take my note of hand for the lady's debt—with the addition of a suitable bonus for yourself."

"Your Royal Highness's note of hand!" exclaimed Crimp, with a sort of dismay at the proposal. "Why, bless your dear heart! it isn't negotiable—I couldn't do nothink with it: and besides, I'm young in the business as a hofficer and haven't so much money to lend."

"What can be done, then?" asked the Prince, carelessly. "For my part, I cannot spare two thousand guineas just at this moment; and if my note of hand will not do, why then——"

"The lady must go to the Fleet—that's the long and short on it," added Mr. Crimp. "But I hope your Royal Highness will make a heffort—for I can assure you she's in a woful plight. All her servants has run away—her friends won't do nothink for her—she's got little or no money left—and since she was arrested, a execution for a small debt has been put into her house in Piccadilly, so that her wery wardrobe is now under restraint, as the sayin' is."

"Well, I am very sorry for it," said the Prince, in a tone of unfeeling abruptness. "But I can

do nothing more in the matter than I have suggested; and therefore it is useless for you to remain here any longer."

"But what answer am I to take back to the poor lady?" demanded the sheriff's-officer.

"Go and tell her that I am so poor I cannot possibly assist her, and so indisposed that I cannot pay her a visit," replied the Prince;—and he waved his hand towards the door in a fashion too significant not to be comprehended by Mr. Crimp. "But stay!" suddenly ejaculated his Royal Highness, starting from his seat: "you had better depart by a private staircase which there is at hand—or else my people in the hall will only be stopping you to ask impertinent questions: for I daresay that some of them would not fail to guess what your calling is. Come, my good fellow—be off—and here's a guinea for you."

Thus speaking, the heir-apparent drew aside a velvet curtain at the extremity of the apartment—unlocked the door which was now revealed—and motioned impatiently for Mr. Crimp to take himself off by the secret staircase. The bailiff, whose right hand clutched the guinea which had been thrust into it, descended half-a-dozen steps at a time in his haste to comply with the royal pleasure, which evidently was that he should lose not a moment in vanishing from the perfumed precincts of Carlton House; and with such precipitation did he bundle himself down the staircase, that he had not time to check his pace when the sounds of ascending footsteps suddenly reached his ears. The consequence was that at the next moment he came in violent collision with the individual who was thus beginning to mount the staircase;—and before the unfortunate bailiff had time to murmur a single syllable of apology, he received a couple of smart lashes from a riding-whip.

"Stupid animal!" cried a voice that was certainly too melodious and flute-like for that of a man—and yet it came from the lips of one wearing a masculine apparel. "Could you not see whither you were going?"

The staircase was only dimly lighted by means of a small fan-window over the private door at the bottom: but Mr. Crimp was nevertheless enabled, by a second glance at the personage whom he had thus encountered, to perceive that it was a splendid woman in the attire of a man;—for the magnificent black hair showered in a thousand ringlets over the broad but sloping shoulders, and the tight-fitting frock-coat developed the luxuriant contours of the superb bust.

"Beg pardon, sir—ma'am—but your whip cuts sharp," said Mr. Nathan Crimp. "I didn't mean no offence by running agin you——"

"Well, then, my good fellow, we will say no more upon the subject," exclaimed the disguised lady, her merry smile revealing the brilliant teeth which appeared like the whitest and purest ivory set between the reddest and moistest coral. "But what on earth are you doing here?—and who are you? For if you will pardon my rudeness," added the Amazon, still laughing, "you seem to me more like a bailiff or writ-server than a Prince's lacquey."

"Well, ma'am—sir, I mean—that is to say, ma'am," stammered Crimp, utterly bewildered as to the proper terms in which he ought to address the superb creature whose feminine charms were too grandly imposing to be concealed by the masculine apparel which nevertheless became her so admirably;—"you ain't wery far wrong in your conjecture——"

"What! then, you *are* an officer?" said Lady Lade, for she indeed it was: and, inspired by one of those sudden and incomprehensible sentiments of curiosity which often prompt even the most indifferent to inquire into the affairs of others, she raised her finger to her bright red lip, whispering in an under-tone, "Hush! speak low—or we may be overheard! And now tell me, my good fellow, what has brought you hither?" she demanded, at the same time slipping a couple of guineas into the bailiff's hand.

"Fust tell me, please, how I'm to address you—sir,—or ma'am?" asked Mr. Crimp, who felt remarkably anxious to be enlightened on that head.

"I am Lady Lade," was the response delivered with a good humoured smile; "and now you know to which sex I really do belong."

"Ah! ma'am, there wasn't no difficulty in telling that much, when once I'd leisure to take one good look at your ladyship," said Mr. Crimp, his mouth watering as he fixed his eyes eagerly upon the superb bosom which seemed ready to burst through the coat that imprisoned it. "But in the fust place I certainly did think you was a genelman—for that whip of your'n hit precious hard——"

"And I have given you the salve for the wound, my man," said the huntress, with a smile, as she glanced down at the gold which Mr. Nathan Crimp still held in his hand.

"Just so," he observed, now consigning the coin to his pocket: "and I wouldn't mind receiving as many lashes as your ladyship likes, at the same price. But you was a-asking me what I'm doing here;—and I don't care if I tell your ladyship the truth. Perhaps your ladyship knows Mrs. Fitzherbert?"

"By name and by sight, as a matter of course," responded the Amazon: "but not to speak to. What of her?"

"She's in a little trouble—or rather a great deal of trouble," continued Mr. Nathan Crimp; "and she sent me with a letter to ask the Prince to assist her. But he says he's too poor to advance any money, and too ill to go and see her."

"Where is she, then?" inquired Lady Letitia.

"At my lock-up in Chancery Lane," was the answer. "But she must go to the Fleet to-morrow unless she pays to-day, as Rigden the lawyer will rule the Sheriff to make a return."

"I know nothing of all those forms and ceremonies," said the Amazon: "but this I do know—that it is scandalous beyond all conception and infamous beyond all description for the Prince to treat the unfortunate lady in such a manner. How much does she owe?"

"Somethink more than a couple of thousand guineas would put her all to rights, may it please your ladyship," replied Crimp. "But I'm sure if such a nice, humane, good-hearted creatur' as your ladyship evidently is, would on'y come and call upon poor Mrs. Fitzherbert, she would feel herself so much obleeged——"

"Yes—I will accompany you to Chancery Lane at once," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' profound meditation. "The business that

has brought me hither upon the present occasion is not so very urgent for a few hours," she added, in a musing tone to herself: "besides, it is probable that if I take Mrs. Fitzherbert's affair in hand for her, I shall have to speak to the Prince on *that* also. I may therefore as well kill two birds with one stone."

Thus musing, the beautiful huntress turned and led the way from the secret staircase, Mr. Nathan Crimp closely following her. Emerging from the private door, they hastened into Pall Mall, where they entered a hackney-coach, which bore them to the dark and musty-looking precincts of Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER CLXIX.

THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

It was five o'clock in the evening; and as a thick fog was coming rapidly over the City, the candles were already lighted in the apartment occupied by Mrs. Fitzherbert in Mr. Nathan Crimp's lock-up house.

This apartment was shabbily furnished and had a grimy appearance. Wherever the captive lady might happen to lay her hand—whether on the table, the side-board, the mantel, or the window-ledge—a dingy shade would be taken up, as it were, upon the snowy fingers. A good fire blazed in the grate—and yet the room wore a general air of discomfort that struck upon the mind like a sensation, and pierced with a chilling effect to the very marrow of the bones. Having been accustomed to sleep upon down—tread upon velvet—eat off massive gold plate—and revel in all the luxuries and elegances of life, Mrs. Fitzherbert experienced her present position in all the keenest sense of its bitterness.

Dull and dusty curtains were drawn over the windows—those windows which were protected with bars strong enough to resist the rapid impetuosity wherewith a lion might bound against them. Useless precaution so far as the present inmate of that room was concerned! *Her* delicate fingers would have shrunk from even touching the rusty surface of the bars! Besides, the apartment was on the first storey—fifteen feet above the level of the street on which it looked—and therefore affording in its own elevated position a pretty tolerable guarantee against a daring leap, even if there were no iron bars to protect the windows at all!

The furniture in the room was old and worm-eaten: the walls were stained with grease—and the ceiling was blackened with smoke.

On the side facing the windows, a door communicated with a sleeping-apartment: and in this chamber there were two beds—the accommodation being intended for a lady and her maid. But in the present instance the occupant of the best suite of rooms in Mr. Nathan Crimp's sponging-house, possessed no dependant of any description either to wait upon or to solace her.

And this lady—the once elegant, brilliant, and courted Mrs. Fitzherbert—was now seated in the comfortless parlour of the lock-up house, plunged in the most sorrowful reflections. But every time she heard a footstep upon the stairs, she started—stretched forth her head—and listened. Two hours had now elapsed since Nathan Crimp had set forth on her errand to Carlton House; and surely her fate must be already decided in one way or another? Was she to be released that evening?—or was she to repair to the Fleet prison next day? These were the alternatives; and, for aught that the unhappy lady could see or anticipate to the contrary, the result now depended entirely on the man who was her husband in the sight of heaven!

It was a little past five o'clock when she was aroused for the twentieth time from her reverie by the sounds of footsteps on the staircase;—and on the present occasion those sounds did not pass by the door communicating with the landing. No—they stopped at the threshold of her apartment—the door was thrown open—and Mr. Nathan Crimp announced in a loud voice, "Lady Letitia Lade!"

As when a sunbeam penetrating amidst an arbour of roses, suddenly flings a ruddy glow upon the marble basin of a fountain,—so did a flush instantaneously appear upon the pale complexion of the captive lady. For the name just announced, was indeed full well known to Mrs. Fitzherbert: the antecedents of Lady Lade—her wretched origin in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles—her connexion with "Sixteen-String Jack"—her marriage with the old baronet—her dissolute life—and the rumour that she had even been very intimate with the Prince himself,—all these matters were perfectly familiar to the fallen lady of quality.

The Amazon instantaneously perceived the glow of mingled indignation and surprise which spread over Mrs. Fitzherbert's countenance. Nor was she unprepared for some such exhibition of feeling: but taking off her hat, she said in her kindest tones, "I come, madam, to sympathise with you—and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments."

"And you ought to be wery grateful, ma'am, to her ladyship for thus stepping for'ard," exclaimed Crimp, "at a moment when all your friends is keeping back'ard. But I'll leave you together for a time, ladies; and you can chat over the whole business."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Crimp closed the door and hurried down stairs, leaving the elegant Mrs. Fitzherbert and the hilarious Amazon alone together.

And strange was the contrast presented by those two women!—strange also in how many points they resembled each other! Mrs. Fitzherbert's radiant head was adorned with a natural crown of golden flaxiness which shone like concrete and circling sunbeams: the Amazon's hair was black as night, and yet shining with so rich a gloss that it seemed as if a glory encircled her head. The eyes of the captive lady were blue—those of the huntress black: but in the depths of each might be read the tale of strong passions, a warm temperament, and a yielding to temptation whenever the pleasure was really coveted and desired. The bust of Mrs. Fitzherbert was grandly beautiful—that of Lady Lade superbly luxuriant: the figure of each was admirably symmetrical and rounded in the richest contours—so that each splendid form seemed glowing to be pressed in the arms of a lover. But the huntress was taller than Mrs. Fitzherbert; and yet the more majestic dignity of the latter prevented this discrepancy from being noticed.

As to the disposition and real character of these

two ladies, the resemblance was much nearer than the Amazon suspected, or than Mrs. Fitzherbert herself would have been over-well pleased to acknowledge. For both were accustomed to obey the dictates of their passions without much regard to morality or virtue: both had overstepped the bounds of modesty at a very early age;—both, in fact, had paid their adoration to the Goddess of Pleasure. The difference, then, between them lay only in the circumstance that Mrs. Fitzherbert had veiled her intrigues as closely as possible and had even sustained a reputation for purity of conduct, save and except so far as her connexion with the Prince was concerned: whereas the Amazon had never troubled herself about the concealment of any one amour in which she engaged—and, although she did not actually make a boast of her dissolute morals, she only smiled or perhaps laughed outright when taxed with her numerous frailties.

Now when the huntress gazed upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, she said within herself, "You blush to receive a visit from me; and yet I am well acquainted with the fact that you were once the mistress of the Marquis de Bellois." But it never struck Lady Lade at the moment that the handsome French nobleman might not have been the only lover whom the stately and prudish Mrs. Fitzherbert had received to her arms—that, indeed, she had rendered many and many an aspirant for her favours superlatively happy—and that perhaps her connexions in this manner had not been so very much less numerous nor less miscellaneous than those of Letitia herself! Only, as we have before said, the one had the grand art of covering her errors with an impenetrable veil—whereas the other had pursued her wanton career as freely and as fearlessly as she was wont to dash along a high road on the back of some spirited charger.

Such were the two ladies that now found themselves alone together. Mrs. Fitzherbert caught eagerly at the hope held out in the few prefatory words which Letitia had hastened to address to her: namely, "I come, madam, to sympathise with you—and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments." The aristocratic lady accordingly smothered in an instant the feeling of annoyance which had at first betrayed itself in the flush that crimsoned her countenance;—and requesting the Amazon to be seated, she said, "I presume that the bailiff has left you to explain to me the result of his mission to Carlton House?"

"Such is the fact, madam," replied Lady Letitia. "And to tell you the truth——"

"Ah! I see that you hesitate—you have disagreeable intelligence to impart!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "The Prince would not see my messenger—or he returned a cold reply—or——Oh! keep me not in suspense, I implore you!"

"Were the result of the man's errand at all satisfactory, I should be overwhelmed with haste to communicate it," said the Amazon: "or he himself would have been too eager to do so—and in that case my presence here would have been rendered unnecessary. But inasmuch as you have no hope in that quarter where you had a right to expect everything——"

"Oh! is it possible that *he* could treat me thus heartlessly?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, clasping her hands in anguish: then, almost immediately subduing her emotions and assuming an air of dignity, she said, "But I will not permit the conduct of such a man to break my spirit altogether. You see that I am calm and collected now: tell me, Lady Lade, how he acted towards the good-hearted and well-meaning individual whom I despatched to him."

"His Royal Highness, madam," responded the huntress, in a measured and emphatic tone, "declares that he is too poor to assist you and too indisposed to come and see you."

"He said *that*—did he?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, endeavouring to retain her composure, but in reality experiencing a cold shiver throughout her frame. "And how happened it, madam, that I have been fortunate enough to deserve your sympathy?—and in what manner may I reckon upon your aid?"

"The step which I have taken was adopted on the spur of the moment," answered the huntress. "You have no doubt heard of me before: and perhaps all that you *have* thus heard is that I am a harum-scarum, good-for-nothing, wild, eccentric, and gay woman? Well, these attributes are perhaps correct enough: but I may observe, without the imputation of vanity, that I possess *a heart*. Now, the fact is, I some time ago became instrumental in procuring for his Royal Highness a loan from a French refugee, called the Marquis de St. Croix. This nobleman now requires the repayment of his money. He has applied to the Prince, who takes not the least notice of his letters. The result is that the Marquis comes to me and demands my intervention; and I promise that I will obtain the reimbursement of funds lent upon my representation and through my agency. Accordingly, I proceed this afternoon to Carlton House—I accidentally run against an individual in a manner which throws us into conversation together—this individual proves to be Mr. Nathan Crimp—and from his lips I glean the story of your misfortunes and the failure of his mission to the Prince. Then *this heart* of mine moves within me: I feel indignant at the outrage put upon one of my sex—I long to sympathise with you—and although I had heard that you were proud, haughty, and overbearing, I thought of you only as an oppressed, persecuted, and neglected woman—and therefore I came hither!"

"Believe me, I thank you—thank you most sincerely," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, profoundly touched by the ingenuous and open-hearted manner of the huntress.

"And I will tell you another reason wherefore I was instantaneously impelled by the thought of succouring you to the utmost of my power," continued the Amazon;—"and that is because you have been made to suffer much by one who unfortunately served the Prince *too* faithfully——"

"Ah! I begin to comprehend you!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now suddenly recollecting that rumour had described the Amazon to be the mistress of Tim Meagles. "But is it possible that you are acquainted——"

"With *all*—with *everything!*" responded Lady Lade, in a low but significant tone. "I am aware that you are the Prince's wedded wife—aware also of the means that were adopted to drive you from Carlton House—aware of the existence of those letters which contain the secret that was held in terror over you——"

"Then you are acquainted with enough to make me blush in your presence," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now acting in perfect accordance with the affected prudery which had become habitual to her: and covering her face with her hands, she appeared to be overwhelmed with shame and confusion.

"Do not annoy yourself, madam," observed the huntress. "I am not quite an angel of purity myself—and perhaps a little farther removed from such an immaculate state of being than you are. Indeed, that same Mr. Meagles to whom I just now alluded as one who had served his Royal Highness too faithfully, had for some time been on intimate terms with me; until the base ingratitude and treachery of the Prince—pardon me for speaking in these harsh terms of his Royal Highness—caused the expatriation of Meagles——"

"And the papers—what became of the papers?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert hastily, and speaking in a tone hoarse and breathless with suspense.

"They fell into the hands of the Prince," replied the Amazon.

"O God! then *he* knows all!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, once again clasping her hands in the anguish of despair.

"Think you, madam," returned the Amazon, "that his Royal Highness would leave you in your present embarrassment, if it were not to avenge himself upon you for that one important passage in your life which those letters reveal? But what will you say when I inform you that these papers are at the present moment in my possession?"

"Oh! you will give them up to me—you will permit me to destroy those evidences of an amour which has proved so fatal to me?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Tell me, dear friend—tell me that you will give me those letters——"

"I dare not, lady—I dare not," interrupted Letitia. "But I may perhaps make use of *other* documents which are likewise in my possession, to terrify the Prince, and wring from him the amount of money you require. On this subject we will discourse presently: but first of all, I must explain to you that inasmuch as Meagles did you a great and serious injury, and as he has since experienced the ingratitude with which the Prince pays those who serve him too faithfully, I know that the mind of my ill-used friend must have undergone such a change as would lead him to make all possible atonement towards those whom he has been the instrument of oppressing and wronging on the behalf of his Royal Highness. Therefore, with this conviction, am I now acting as Meagles himself would act were he in London at the present moment."

"Again, my dear Letitia," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, assuming her most coaxing tone and wheedling manner,—"again do I thank you for all the generous sympathy you are displaying towards me. But, Oh! you would bind me everlastingly towards you if you were to give me up, or destroy in my presence, those fatal letters——"

"My dear madam, I dare not!" was the emphatic reply given by the huntress. "Mr. Meagles will be in England shortly, and then those papers must either be returned to the Prince himself, or placed by me at Meagles' disposal. Which course I shall pursue, will depend upon circumstances. But there is one grand and important use to which I can turn certain *other* papers, if you will——"

"And those other papers?" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert inquiringly.

"The proofs of your marriage with the Prince!" was the low, solemn, and whispered response.

"Ah! these also are in your possession?" exclaimed the lady, surveying Letitia with as much suspicion and alarm as profound amazement.

"Yes, madam," was the calm response. "I hold in my possession such documents as would shake the very monarchy to its foundation!"

"And how—my God!—how can you serve *me*!" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, trembling all over with the nervous excitement of mingled hope, fear, and cruel suspense.

"Listen, madam," resumed the huntress, speaking in a low but impressive tone. "If you say but the word I will proceed to Windsor and seek an interview with the King. It would not be the first time that I have encountered his Majesty with threats in order to wring from him certain concessions," observed the beauteous Amazon, with a smile. "On the former occasion it was to procure favours for the Prince—this time it shall be to demand justice for you. Leave the matter in my hands—and if I do not succeed in obtaining for you the title of a Duchess with an income of twenty thousand a-year——"

"Letitia, you are raving!—my dear friend, you are raving!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, wildly excited with new hopes and aspirations. "The King will spurn you from him——"

"The King will grant me all that I require," rejoined the Amazon, with the decisive emphasis and look of one which is confident of success in a proposed undertaking.

"But my union with the Prince exists in contravention of the Royal Marriage Act," said Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and the King will defy our threats."

"Not so, madam," returned the huntress: "for I have already well weighed the various details and chances of the whole proceeding. The Prince, in espousing you, espoused a Catholic; and therefore he violated the Act of Settlement and forfeits his right, claim, and title to the British crown. Whether the marriage be good or bad according to the Royal Marriage Act, matters not to our purpose: it is a marriage in defiance of the Act of Settlement—and this is the point we have to rest our proceedings upon. Think you, then, that the King will abandon the cause of his eldest son—or that his Majesty will assist him out of this dilemma?"

"It is heaven that has sent you to me, my beloved friend!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now throwing her arms about the Amazon's neck and embracing her with as much affection as if they were sisters. "A few weeks—nay, a few days ago, I would not have stirred a step in such a proceeding as the one you have outlined to me—nor would I have permitted a soul to take up my cause in such a manner. But now that I am so completely crushed and overwhelmed by calamities—now that adversities have fallen upon me thickly as hail—and now, too, that his Royal Highness proclaims his utter indifference, if not his open hostility and defiance, I feel that a change has come over me, and that I shall not be wise in suffering myself to be yielded up to martyrdom in order to spare the feelings of others. No—I will adopt the course

which you have chalked out, my dear friend; and my eternal gratitude shall be your due!"

"To-morrow morning, then," said the Amazon, "I will repair to Windsor Castle and obtain an interview with the King."

"But you will not leave me immediately?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking the hands of the huntress who had risen to depart. "Consider how lonely—how dull—how wretched I must be in this horrible place all by myself," continued the patrician lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"I will remain with you a few hours—nay, more until to-morrow morning, if you will," said Letitia; "and we shall thus have ample leisure to discuss and mature the whole plan of proceeding."

"Oh you will stay with me until the morning!" cried Mrs Fitzherbert, embracing the huntress in the enthusiasm of the most unfeigned delight. "This is indeed kind—most kind on your part! For to pass the night alone in such a place, is to stand on the verge of suicide every instant!"

"But we will not give way to horrible thoughts, my dear madam," said Lady Letitia. "On the contrary, we will send out for some wine—then perhaps you will permit me to smoke my cigarette—and we will chat, laugh, and enjoy ourselves so well that we shall altogether forget we are within the bars of a sponging-house."

"Be it so!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance brightening up more and more: then, as she drew her chair close to the fire and rang the bell for the servant to procure the wine, she observed, "And when I am a Duchess with an income of twenty thousand a-year, my best and dearest friend shall continue to be Letitia Lade."

CHAPTER CLXX.

A NIGHT IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

It was about half-past nine o'clock in the evening; and while Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon were discussing their plans up-stairs, Mr. Nathan Crimp and his man Jack were discussing their pipes in the front office on the ground-floor.

The fog had cleared away—or rather had turned into a misty rain; and the evening was altogether as unpleasant as it well could be. The bailiff and his man were accordingly adding the creature-comfort of a quart-pot of egg-flip to the soothing influence of tobacco; and they had just quaffed each the first draught of the agreeable beverage, when a noise out in the street attracted their notice.

"By Jove! I will have just one kiss!" exclaimed a voice.

"And so will I!" cried another. "But how infernally modest she is!"

"And yet she showed her ankles pretty well as she walked!" said a third.

"Leave me alone—leave me alone!" cried the object of these remarks: and then there was a scuffle close outside the door of the sponging-house.

"Come along, Jack," exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp. "It's some of them blackguard law-students a-kissing a modest gal, I'll be bound."

"Well, let 'em do it," growled the man, who did not see the utility of abandoning his pipe and the egg-flip on any such chivalrous expedition as the one in which his master appeared anxious to engage him. "The law-students don't hurt you."

"No—but they sha'n't molest every modest gal as passes this way," exclaimed Nathan. "It ain't proper for me to permit it, being a householder and rate-payer and what not. So come along, Jack—and I'll stand a second pot of that stuff."

"Ah! that's another thing altogether," observed Jack: and, springing from his seat with extraordinary alacity he followed his master out into the street, where four or five young fellows, who in the present day would be signalized as "gents," were laying hold of a young person of apparently lady-like and modest demeanour, and who was vainly struggling to extricate herself from their grasp.

"Now, then, can't ye leave the young o'oman alone?" cried Mr. Nathan Crimp, leaping from the top of his door-steps down upon the nearest of the disturbers of the public peace: then, dealing a blow to his right and another to his left, and being ably seconded by his man Jack, the valorous bailiff not only rescued the young lady in the twinkling of an eye, but left all her assailants sprawling in the mud.

To conduct the said young lady into the office and bang the door in the faces of the half-drunken sparks who, springing to their legs again, rushed up the steps after the object of their fancy,—all this was the work of a moment;—and the bailiff's man very considerately handed the young lady the pewter pot of egg-flip. To Jack's great delight, but somewhat to the surprise of Mr. Crimp, the young lady took a sip of the beverage: then, having returned the vessel to the understrapper, she expressed her thanks for the service so opportunely rendered her. While thus speaking, she drew forth a guinea from her reticule; and placing it in Mr. Crimp's hand, she added, "You will perhaps send for a hackney-coach to convey me home: and in the meantime I shall feel obliged if you will permit me to warm myself by the fire for a few minutes—for the chill of the evening has penetrated to the very marrow of my bones."

As the young lady thus spoke, Mr. Crimp and his man surveyed her with some attention: and they could not help thinking that the law-students had at all events displayed a due appreciation of the beautiful in seeking to refresh themselves with kisses culled from her lips. For beautiful the young lady really was. Her hair, of a rich chesnut, was curled into ringlets; and an elegant gipsy hat set off a very pleasing countenance, with dark eyes, a handsome nose, and pearly teeth. She was above the middle height—her form was slender—her shape symmetrical—and her deportment characterised by dignified elegance. The dress that she wore was beautiful in all respects, and of handsome materials; and in fine, her whole appearance was that of a well-bred young lady.

That she should be alone in the streets at that hour, and that she should drink egg-flip, certainly astonished Mr. Nathan Crimp to a slight degree: but when he fingered the gold which she placed in his palm, all his thoughts turned in a moment so completely in her favour, that he was ready to believe her to be a duchess or a princess if she proclaimed herself as such.

"Fire to warm yourself, Miss —— or ma'am?" he exclaimed. "By jingo! there ain't a fire a-light in the whole place except down in the kitchen and up in the fust floor where them ladies is," he added, turning towards his man Jack.

"Well, why can't the young lady go up for a few minutes where them ladies is?" demanded the follower. "I des say they won't objeck to such genteel company. As for poor Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"Hush, Jack!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "What's the use——"

"Did you say Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded the young lady, turning abruptly towards the man: then, without even waiting for a reply, she exclaimed, "Good heavens! is it possible that the unfortunate lady has come to this? I had heard that everything was at an end between her and a certain illustrious personage—and I had likewise heard that she was in much pecuniary difficulty: but I could not have conceived that she would have been compelled to exchange her handsome abode in Piccadilly for a comparatively poor lodging in Chancery Lane."

"You see the young lady don't twig the place," observed Jack, half aside to his master. "This is a lock-up, Miss—a sponging-house——"

"Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lock-up," cried the young lady, overwhelmed with astonishment.

"I'm blowed if our new friend don't know summut about it, though," whispered Crimp to his follower. "See how glib the words '*lock-up*' fell from her tongue."

"Well, I should like to be introduced into the same room where Mrs. Fitzherbert is now," resumed the young lady. "I would do all I could to console her——"

"She's got Lady Letitia Lade with her," observed Crimp; "and I dare say they won't objeck to see you for a short time, Miss —'specially when

you tells 'em how you've been delivered from rape and ravishment and what not, by me and my man here. So please to walk up to the fust floor, Miss, while I send for the hackney-coach——"

"Don't be in a hurry for the hackney-coach just for a minute or two," said the young lady, slipping another gold piece into the hand of Mr. Nathan Crimp. "The truth is, I should like to pass half-an-hour or so in the company of Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. I have heard a great deal about both of them."

"Egad! you may pass the night with 'em, Miss, for any think I care," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "At all events I won't send for the hackney-coach until you rings the bell up-stairs. And now if you'll foller me, Miss—there, that's right—mind your head agin the top of the staircase—it's raythcr low and precious dark—but here we are safe and sound on the landin'. What name shall I say, if you please, Miss?" asked the bailiff, in a low whisper, as he paused at the head of the stairs.

"What name?" repeated the young lady. "Oh! Miss Plantagenet," she added instantaneously.

"Miss Plantagenet!" accordingly exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp, as he threw the door wide open: then, stepping into the room and bowing first to Mrs. Fitzherbert and immediately afterwards to the Amazon, he said, "Beg pardon, ladies—but I've taken the liberty to introduce a companion to you—and I know you'll be civil to her and all that kind of thing, 'cos she seems to be a wery nice young creetur' and was used scandalous in the street just now by some rollicking sparks as was determined to kiss her. But me and my man—Ah! a handy feller is that there Jack when he chooses—made light work on it when we tumbled down upon the snobs and rescued the young lady in a jiffey. So, as she's raythcr cold—and as it wouldn't be safe for her to think of leaving while them rascals is a-loiterin' about in front of the door, I've took the liberty of introducing her to you, ladies——"

"There never was such a long story that might have been summed up in so few words," interrupted the Amazon, but with a good-natured smile. "Miss Plantagenet seeks a warm fire and female companionship—and she can have both here. At least, unless the real owner of the apartment has any objection?" added the huntress, looking inquiringly at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Not the slightest, my dear friend," was the immediate response. "How could I, under the circumstances? Pray be seated near the fire, Miss Plantagenet," said the patrician lady, doing the honours of the comfortless room in the lock-up with all that elegance and grace which, having been acquired in the gilded saloons of fashion, were now so habitual to her.

"Ah! I knowed it would be all right," muttered Crimp, as he closed the door and withdrew.

Meantime Miss Plantagenet had advanced into the room and acknowledged with a graceful salutation the courteous remarks which had fallen from the lips of Letitia Lade and Mrs. Fitzherbert. The reader may be well-assured that these two ladies scanned, or rather scrutinised, at a glance the external appearance of their new friend; and the result was highly satisfactory. Indeed, they were both immediately prepossessed in her favour; and as she was the heroine of the little adventure in the street which had compelled her to take refuge in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house, she became the object of additional interest on that account.

"Madam," said the young lady, addressing herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I am delighted on the one hand to have the honour of forming your acquaintance; but I am deeply distressed on the other that our first meeting should take place in such a den. May I hope that your embarrassment is only temporary?—and may I add, without giving offence, that if the resources which I can command be adequate to the purpose of accomplishing your liberation, I shall experience the greatest happiness in placing my means at your disposal."

"Such kindness from a stranger — a perfect stranger — deserves my sincerest gratitude," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, scarcely knowing what to think of the offer, whether it were a mere idle compliment or a genuine proposal.

"Is it possible that you have had some object in coming hither, Miss Plantagenet?" asked the Amazon, who began to suspect that the visit of the young lady might not be altogether so accidental an occurrence as it at first seemed.

"I can assure you, ladies, that ten minutes ago I had not the slightest notion of being in this house, nor in your company," said Miss Plantagenet, whose voice had that semi-masculine tone which is harmonious as a flute; and as she now spoke with the emphasis of sincerity, it sounded rich with its somewhat deep melody to the ear. "A few words will suffice to give those explanations which the master of the house could not altogether convey when he introduced me, in his own rough but honest style, into your presence. I live at the West End and am entirely my own mistress, although so young. Having passed the evening with some friends in this neighbourhood, I expected my maid to fetch me home: but she did not come — and, in order to avoid giving any trouble at my friends' house, either in sending for a hackney-coach or escorting me to one, I stole away from the party. Close by this door I was insulted by some rude young men—whereupon the master of the house came forth and rescued me. Being very cold and much frightened, he proposed that I should warm myself and at the same time seek the company of two ladies whom he represented as being in the house at the moment, and whom he named. I then felt reassured—for I knew you both by reputation; and I am as happy to form the acquaintance of Lady Lade as that of Mrs. Fitzherbert. So much for the incidents that brought me hither. Now let me ask whether you will give me credit for sincerity in regard to the proposal I made just now?"—and as Miss Plantagenet put this question, she addressed herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Accident — or shall I say Providence?—has sent me two generous friends," observed the patrician lady, glancing from Miss Plantagenet to the Amazon and looking her gratitude at both. "But the amount for which I am incarcerated is large—very large—two thousand guineas and upwards—and the lawyer who has taken such harsh measures against me, is a severe and cruel man—a Mr. Rigden——"

"Rigden!" ejaculated Miss. Plantagenet, with a sudden start.

"Yes—do you know him?" inquired Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"A little—quite enough to be well aware that he is all you represent him to be—cruel and severe," observed Miss Plantagenet. "But nevertheless—if you have no other chance of releasing yourself, than by paying the full amount, I will not fly from my promise; and the sum shall be placed at your disposal in the morning."

"My dear young friend," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking both the hands of the visitress and pressing them warmly, "I know not how to express my gratitude to you for this unlooked-for—this unmerited—this generous kindness on your part."

"But remember, my dear madam, that it is necessary for you to remain here until the result of my negotiations in a certain quarter shall be ascertained," said Lady Lade: "because it is absolutely requisite to show a certain personage how you have been neglected by another exalted personage——"

"And in case of any disappointment or delay," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I can accept the generous proposal of our new friend."

"Precisely so," observed the Amazon. "Let that be the understanding. But with this addition, however, that I may be permitted to furnish my quota of the amount requisite to accomplish your release—provided that our other plan should, as you suggest, either fail or experience delay."

"Again must I declare that Providence has sent me two of the kindest friends that any one placed, in such embarrassments as I, could possibly have," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "But it is growing late—and perhaps Miss Plantagenet does not feel over well pleased at the idea of venturing forth alone once more."

"I will cheerfully accompany her home," exclaimed Lady Letitia: then, with a merry laugh she added, "And my Amazonian garb will serve to protect us both from insult. Or we can tell Crimp to send for a coach——"

"Were I at my own house," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a heavy sigh, "I should ask Miss Plantagenet to favour me with her company until the morrow——"

"Oh! do not think that I will desert you, dear lady, because you happen to be placed in this embarrassment," cried Miss Plantagenet, the colour mounting to her cheeks and her eyes flaming up with a strange light. "No—it is precisely because you can *not* invite me to repose upon a bed of down and in an elegantly appointed chamber, that I must insist upon remaining with you until I see how far my humble services may be rendered available to your purposes, or to what extent any other plan which you have in view may succeed."

"Lady Lade proposes to pass the night with me," said Mrs. Fitzherbert: "but as she will be compelled to leave me the first thing in the morning, it would give me unfeigned pleasure and be performing an act of pure benevolence if you would stay with me until her return to-morrow night or early on the ensuing day——"

"Nothing will afford me greater pleasure," said Miss Plantagenet, evidently catching at the proposal with eagerness.

"Then we will be a merry party, although our mirth take place in a vile lock-up house!" exclaimed the Amazon. "Come, I will ring the bell and inform the servant that you and I," she added, turning towards Miss Plantagenet, "intend to keep our friend Mrs. Fitzherbert company."

The domestic was accordingly summoned; and when she received the proposed intimation and had retired, Mrs. Fitzherbert locked the door of the parlour and threw open that of the bed-room, saying, "It is time that we should seek repose, since you, dear Lady Lade, will have to rise early in order to start for Windsor."

The three ladies accordingly passed into the sleeping-room; and as there were but two beds, a little discussion commenced as to how the occupants thereof should be disposed. Mrs. Fitzherbert suggested that she and Lady Lade should sleep together, so as to accommodate Miss Plantagenet with a bed to herself: but Miss Plantagenet vowed and protested that she could not possibly sleep alone in a strange house—and thereupon the discussion was continued between the Amazon and Mrs. Fitzherbert as to which should take Miss Plantagenet as a companion. Each was most anxious to have her: but each was willing to yield up her society to the other. At length it was settled that Mrs. Fitzherbert should share her bed with the young lady; and this point being comfortably settled, the process of undressing commenced.

To the imagination of those who admire female beauty, and who look upon lovely woman as the connecting link between human nature and angelic perfection, it must be a delicious theme for reflection,—those three charming creatures assembled together, and whiling away in agreeable discourse the time occupied by the night toilette. Miss Plantagenet, it is true, bashfully kept aloof from Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon: but these two ladies remained together to render mutual assistance in the little details of laying aside their apparel—and, even as women, they could not help admiring the glowing charms which they thus revealed to each other's eyes.

At length the process of undressing was terminated—the light was extinguished—and while the Amazon took possession of one couch, Mrs. Fitzherbert proceeded to enter the other, where Miss Plantagenet was already ensconced.

CHAPTER CLXXI.

THE PAUPER INVALID.

THE night passed—and misty, damp, and drear was the morning that crept slowly forth from the eastern horizon, like a sluggard who is loathe to leave a warm couch. And not only did the cheerless light steal in betwixt the ill-closed curtains of the bed-chamber in the sponging-house; but penetrated with even a still more gloomy effect into the infirmary of Whitechapel workhouse.

And taking leave for a short space of the three charming occupants of the best sleeping apartment in Mr. Crimp's abode, we must concentrate our reader's attention in the hospital-room of that spacious receptacle of pauperism to which we have just alluded.

For although it was in the time of the old Poor Law, which was far more merciful than the present

barbarian statute, yet was that particular workhouse full, as was every other workhouse in the kingdom then, and as they ever will continue to be, so long as the social system remains corrupt and rotten to its very core. For when the sons and daughters of toil have worn themselves out in producing all the elegances, luxuries, and refinements of life for the bloated, pampered, and despotic rich,—when the millions have exhausted all the vital powers of fibre nerve, and sinew, in toiling from dawn to darkness for the indolent, luxurious, and ungrateful few,—when labour has achieved its all for the behoof of idleness, and the bee is perishing from the fatigues imposed upon it by the unceasing demands of the drone,—when the over-tasked wretches of the proletarian race become prematurely old in the service of stern task-masters,—when the hewers of wood cannot cut another faggot, nor the drawers of water raise another bucket,—when the once sturdy labourer in the field is useful no longer, and the once skilful mechanic in the factory can no more compete with younger hands,—then away with them—away with them to the workhouse, and let them thank their stars that such places should be in existence for their accommodation!

Diabolical system!—accursed state of society! For thee, poor working man, the future has no promise. Toil arduously and severely as thou wilt, act honestly and uprightly as thou may'st, conduct thyself peacefully and docilely as thou can'st,—and yet thou reapest no reward in thine old age! When the fulness of years comes upon thee, and thy hair grows white, and thy limbs are feeble, and thou lackest not only the necessaries but also the comforts of life,—*then* what is thy destiny? Is it a little cottage—humble, and yet neat and cheerful,—with jessamine twining over the portico and roses blooming beneath the lattice,—so that thou mayest sit in front of thy porch of an evening and enjoy the blessed sun-set and the fragrant breeze, while thy grown-up children stand near, surveying thee with mingled love and veneration, and frolicksome grandchildren climb upon thy knees, play at horse with thy cane, and listen in infantine wonderment to hear thy great silver watch tick;—is all this the scene which constitutes the reward that in thine old age thou reapest for the arduous and honest toils of all the best years of thy life? Gracious God! how fearful is the contrast which the stern truth of the picture presents to our view! For, if we would seek for the worn-out working-man in the fulness of his years and his venerable decrepitude,—if we would follow the son of toil, from the rural scene where he is useful no longer, or from the factory where his skill is no more availing—if we would follow him to the end of his life's journey and trace his steps when age renders them slow and feeble, until he goes down into the damp solitude of the grave,—then must we seek the old, old man—*not* in a neat cottage, surrounded by a happy and loving family—but in the streets as a mendicant, in the felon's gaol as a vagabond, or in the workhouse as a pauper!

Such is the state to which the wretched, despised, oppressed race of British proletarians is reduced! But who hath crushed them thus effectually?—who hath enslaved them so infamously? The vain, proud, indolent, and rapacious Aristocracy! And this same Aristocracy it is whose infatuation is so complete that it believes its own barbarian institution proof against the continuous though silent pressure of truth: this same Aristocracy it is that will take no warning from the signs of the times, but persists in maintaining the industrious millions in a condition of serfdom and wretchedness;—this same Aristocracy it is that monopolises the government, and is so thoroughly incompetent to govern! Nay, more: this very self-same Aristocracy, in its astounding impudence and inflated presumption, refuses the millions their rights on the plea that they are too ignorant to know how to use them: whereas the real intelligence and the sterling common sense of the country are to be found in the contemned, insulted, and outraged masses! There is as much difference between the Aristocratic Mind and the Working Class Mind, as there is between the gew-gaw frippery and finery of a fashionable milliner's show-room, and the stupendous though rugged grandeur of the Alpine mountains!

But to resume the thread of our narrative.

Opening from one extremity of the infirmary in Whitechapel workhouse, was a much smaller room, which was used for patients who required to be kept particularly tranquil. On the occasion to which we are now referring, it happened that in "the little infirmary," as it was called, there was only one invalid;—and this was a man who had been admitted at his own request, a few days previously, in consequence of some very severe injuries which he had received.

The man of whom we are speaking, awoke in the wretched pallet where he lay stretched, just as the first glimmering of dawn rendered visible the frame-work of the window facing that pauper-couch. A sensation of violent thirst immediately began to torture him: he stretched out his arm, with a painful effort, to feel if any refreshing beverage had been placed by the bed-side—but there was none!

"Neglect—cruel neglect—always neglect—nothing but neglect!" he murmured to himself. "I heard the doctor tell the nurse a dozen times to be sure and let me have barley-water to drink—and that she must moreover come in to see how I was at least three or four times in the course of the night. But, no—no! I have awakened at every hour—I have heard the clock strike on every occasion since eight last night—and I am sure that no one has been near me! Ah! one may die of neglect in this accursed place! No heathenish cruelty can be greater than that with which the poor are treated in this Christian country!—Christian country, indeed!" spoke the patient, in a louder and more emphatic tone: "the diabolical tyranny which is practised in this land of Bibles and Exeter Hall rantings, is enough to make infidels and atheists of us all!"

Then, ceasing to give utterance to his thoughts—but not ceasing to think profoundly and more bitterly still upon his wrongs—the invalid remained tranquil for some time, while the dawn advanced slowly but perceptibly, bringing into relief all the cheerless features of that hospital-chamber.

At last the tortures of thirst became intolerable;—and though at the risk of drawing down upon himself the vengeance of a sottish, surly, unfeeling nurse, the invalid was compelled to raise his voice and implore a drop of drink.

Not the slightest notice was taken of his appeal: but, maddened by the burning sensation which that feverish thirst produced, the invalid continued to call for water. At one moment his demand was made in the language of a suppliant: then it was accompanied by a remonstrance against the unfeeling neglect of which he was the victim;—and then it was followed by bitter, bitter complainings against the tyranny of the world's institutions.

"For the love of God! give me drink—give me drink—I implore you! Oh! pray do bring me some water! I am sorry to cause trouble: but this burning thirst distracts me. Ah! wherefore should you treat me with this cruel neglect? I would not behave so to you. Nurse! give me water, I implore you! I would not treat a dog as I am treated, though a man and a Christian! But, Oh! better, far better to be one of the King's hounds* in this country, than one of the doomed race of working-men! Holy God! how is it possible that millions of men can tolerate such an atrocious social system? Give me water, I say—bring me drink—or I will drag myself from this straw mattress—I will yell, howl, and scream—I will raise the whole house——"

"You infernal noisy troublesome pauper!" growled the hoarse voice of an elderly woman from the adjoining room; "will you hold your tongue?"

"I am perishing with thirst," moaned the wretched man in a stifling tone—for his throat seemed as if it were parched with hot ashes.

"Well, perish and be damned!" exclaimed the woman, who was indeed the night-nurse of the infirmary, as she flung open the door which separated the two rooms and appeared upon the threshold in a flannel gown tied loosely round the waist, and a dirty nightcap with great frills flapping over her face.

The appearance of this female was altogether disgusting in the extreme. Her face was full, round, rubicund, and greasy: her nose was pimpled—her eyes were watery—her teeth large and yellow. Being very fat, and having on no stays, her person resembled an enormous sack filled with bran and tied round the middle with a rope. Her duty was to sit up at night and attend upon the patients: but she usually slept more soundly and snored more loudly than any of them.

"Now then, you cussed pauper," she cried, after the invalid had once more besought her to give him some drink; "do you suppose I've got nothing to do but to wait on your whims and put up with your nonsense? What do you mean, I should like to know, by lying there grumbling in that way? Now, come, one of you little uns," cried the nurse, turning round and addressing a group of children in the room whence she had emerged;—"one of you look sharp and bring this here feller some water out of that jug on the table—for there isn't no barley-water. I hadn't time to make none last night."

"It's a shame to let children come up into the hospital-rooms at all," muttered an invalid who lay in the larger apartment.

"What do you mean by saying as how that anything's a shame?" demanded the night-nurse, turning fiercely away from the threshold and advancing straight up to the bed of the poor devil who had let slip the unfortunate observation. "Suppose the beadle comes and knocks at the gate at nine o'clock in the evening, with three or four children at his heels, which he picked up starving and crying in the open street?—and suppose that the whole workus is so full that there isn't a atom of room to stow away the new-comers, except up here in the 'firmary? Well, then, if you suppose all this, you'll just suppose the real truth which happened last night: and now I should like to know where's the shame of putting these young uns up in this place."

The invalid who had volunteered the unfortunate objurgatory remark which evoked this long tirade, held his peace; and the woman turned her rheumy eyes upon the children of whom she had been speaking.

The juvenile group consisted of three: one was a boy of about thirteen—another was a boy of eight—and the third was a girl of six years of age. Three veritable skeletons were they—emaciated to a degree that would have caused the flesh of any humane person to creep upon the bones merely to cast one glance upon these poor children. And as if the scandal to civilisation, to Christianity, and to the social system, should be more complete, these living skeletons were clothed in such utter rags and tatters, that all the ghastly details of their emaciation were laid bare to the view,—so that their ribs might be counted one by one, the deep holes in their necks be scrutinised with anatomical nicety, and the whole frame-work of their bones be scrutinised as it were through the fleshless skin that covered them.

These three objects of wretchedness had just risen from the mattress where they had slept, huddled together;—and having put on their rags—that mockery of a clothing—by some undefinable means or another, they were whispering in low and tremulous tones, when the night-nurse called the elder boy to her.

In obedience to her commands, he filled an earthenware mug with water, and carried it into the "little infirmary" adjoining. But scarcely had his eyes encountered those of the invalid who lay alone in that room, when an ejaculation of mingled wonderment and delight burst from the boy's lips; and, dropping the mug, he sprang into the man's arms.

"Father—dearest father!" were the words that now fell from his tongue.

"My son—my own poor boy!" sobbed the invalid, as he strained the wretched object of misery to his breast.

And these ejaculations had reached the ears of the other two children;—and, immediately comprehending that their father was found at last, they ran into the adjacent room to receive his caresses; and he wept over them in their turn.

Thus was it that James Melmoth, the workingman, had his three children restored to him,—*he* lying in the pauper-bed of a workhouse, and *they* presenting to his appalled view the harrowing spectacle of such unsurpassable misery!

The night-nurse had followed the two younger children into the room; and she therefore became an eye-witness of the affecting scene which thus took place. But the woman was not moved by the

* And so it is at the present day. The royal staghounds and Prince Albert's dogs are better treated than the sons and daughters of toil.

sight: she had been too many years in that workhouse and had seen too much of pauperism and its miseries not to have her soul hardened, tanned, toughened, and rendered sympathy-proof. She accordingly gazed for a few moments in stolid curiosity upon that family group, thus re-united within the walls of a poor-house;—and then leaving those skeleton children and that invalid father to mingle their tears, their sobs, and their caresses, the woman turned back into the large room of the infirmary to pass her comments upon the incident and brew herself some nice strong coffee.

"O father!" sobbed the eldest boy; "what has become of you all this time? Do you know—do you know——"

"That your mother is——" murmured the other lad.

"Dead!" whispered the eldest, in a voice that was only just audible.

"Yes—yes—I know it—I know it!" exclaimed Melmoth, throwing himself back upon the pillow and pressing his hand to his forehead—as if he could thereby shut out some horrible reminiscence from his brain.

"But how *did* you know it, dear father?—how *could* you know it?" inquired the eldest lad. "You were not with us *then*—we have not seen you since until *now*——"

"And yet I know that my poor wife is dead—that your unfortunate mother perished of want, grief, and wretchedness," interrupted Melmoth, in the deep tone of mingled rage and despair. "But do not ask me how I know it, boy——it was in a dream—a horrible dream——a dream such as I would not dream over again—no, not for worlds! My God! when I think that I beheld my poor wife stretched in the narrow coffin—with the moon shining upon her marble countenance——"

"O father! don't go on like that!" exclaimed the eldest boy, sobbing bitterly: for he began to fear lest sorrow had deranged the intellects of his only surviving parent. "I suppose you must have heard of poor mother's death somehow or another?"

"Well, well," said the working-man, the convulsions of his countenance showing that he was wrestling with some internal anguish of a fearful nature. "Let us talk no more upon that point. But tell me, James—tell me——the baby——"

"Dead—dead likewise," murmured the lad. "Poor baby!"

"Poor baby!" echoed the other boy; and then he and his little sister began to cry piteously.

"I can scarcely repine if God has taken my innocent babe unto himself," observed Melmoth, in a low and trembling voice. "But tell me how it happened—all about it——"

And lying flat upon his back, he covered his face with his hands.

"You see, father," began the eldest boy, "it was on the door-steps of a rich mansion at the West End that mother sank down and died."

"Could you lead me to the spot, James?" demanded Melmoth, without removing his hands from his face—so that his voice sounded hollow, as if emanating from a cavern.

"Yes—I am sure I could," replied the boy, bursting into tears. "My God! I shall never forget that moment! And then," he continued, amidst many vain attempts to subdue the sobs that broke his voice and nearly suffocated him,—"and then the beadle came and took us to the workhouse, and baby was given to an old woman to nurse, in the female paupers' ward. Next morning poor baby was found dead by the woman's side——"

"Poor baby!" murmured Melmoth, who lay stretched out and motionless as a carved statue on a tumular monument.

"The doctor was sent for—but the regular one being absent at the time, another came," proceeded young Melmoth, "and he said something about the child being overlaid. I don't know exactly what it was, although I was present at the time in the room where poor baby's body lay and where the doctor came to look at it. But I am perfectly sure that the old woman to whom baby was entrusted, was accused of having gone to bed tipsy. However, the doctor said it had better be hushed up—and he had baby's body taken to his house—to examine it, I think they said: but I never heard any more about it——"

"And was there no funeral for baby?" inquired Melmoth, in a deep low tone.

"Not that I know of," responded the lad. "There was a funeral for mother; and I attended it. Brother and sister were said to be too little to go to it: but they cried very much, poor things! The funeral was a wretched affair—and the undertaker was very savage with me because I fell on my knees by the side of the coffin, and—and——"

"Go on, James—go on," said Melmoth, his voice becoming lower and deeper. "You fell down by the side of your poor mother's coffin——"

"And I prayed God to bless you, father—and to bless my poor brother and sister," continued the lad, his words being scarcely intelligible on account of the agonising sobs that broke upon his articulation. "I did not pray God to bless poor dear mother's soul and take it unto himself—because I felt assured that she had gone to heaven! Yes—she had suffered too much on earth, and was too good, and too kind to us, not to have gone to heaven!"

"You are right, James," said Melmoth: "she has gone to heaven! And there she will not meet rich people to oppress her: for very, very few kings, queens, lords, and great folks, can possibly go to heaven! I know it—I am sure of it! I have had glimpses of heaven as well as of hell—and I have seen that those who are miserable and trampled upon in this world, become happy in the next—whereas those who are pampered, luxurious, and despotic on earth, are the very ones that people hell hereafter. And if this were not so, where would be the justice of God?"

"Yes—you are right, father—you must be right," said the boy. "I cried much—very much—when poor mother was put into the ground; and I should like to have seen baby buried—I mean that I might have prayed over her——"

"But you tell me that the body was sent to the doctor's house and that you never heard any more of it?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Such was the case, father," returned the lad, still sobbing heavily.

"And do you know where that doctor lived, or what his name was?" demanded Melmoth.

"His name was Thurston—and he lived somewhere at the West End—in May Fair, I think they said," replied the lad.

"Good! I shall not fail to remember it," observed Melmoth, with a deep and ominous concen-

tration of feeling evident in his tone. "And now tell me how you came to leave that workhouse at the West End and find your way into this."

"The master of the workhouse at the West End let us be together until after mother's funeral," continued the lad; "and then he wanted to separate us—I mean to put me and brother into one ward, and sister into another. But sister cried so dreadfully that I would not let her be taken from me; and as we were obliged either to submit to the rules or leave the place, we chose the last. So we were turned out one morning—each with a piece of bread—and in our rags——"

"My God! my God!" murmured Melmoth, who still kept his face covered with his hands: but the shaking of the bed beneath him showed how terribly his form was convulsed with the workings of his inward emotions.

"And so we had to beg our bread again, as we did when mother was alive," continued the lad; "and a shocking time we had of it. But I need not make you more unhappy than you are, dear father, by describing to you the dreadful hardships we have undergone. You may be sure—oh! you may be sure," exclaimed the boy, with all the enthusiasm of sincerity, while the big tears rolled down his pale sunken cheeks and his voice vibrated with the tremulousness of deep feeling,—"you may be sure that whenever I did get anything, dear little sister was taken care of first—and brother next—and myself last——"

"O God! O God! this is almost more than I can bear," murmured Melmoth, writhing in the pauper-bed as if he were struggling against some invisible fiend sitting upon his breast like a night-mare. "Very terrible is the history of poverty, O Lord! —and that tale is the history of millions and millions on the face of the globe! Oh! if thou art really a God of justice, reveal thyself as such and put an end to a state of things which thy goodness would not have engendered of its own free will!"

"Father—dear father—do not reproach the good God to whom my poor mother always taught me to pray," whispered the lad in a tone of gentle but earnest remonstrance.

"I was wrong, my boy—wrong!" said Melmoth. "But there are moments in our lives when we doubt the existence of everything good, because we see that the world is ruled by everything bad. And yet *I* should not be sceptical—no, not I, of all living men!" added the pauper-invalid, his voice suddenly resuming its tone of profound solemnity. "For I have seen heaven in my dreams—aye, and hell too——"

"Father—dear father—do not talk in that way any more!" cried the lad. "But tell me what is the matter with you—how long have you been ill—why you did not seek us out——And, Ah! this reminds me that four or five days before poor mother's death, she told us that you had returned to London—that she was quite sure you had—for that she had overheard your voice in the room where she slept one night—a miserable place, in a lodging-house: and the room was quite dark at the time when you came in—and poor mother fainted for joy on recognising your voice—but when she recovered her senses again, you were gone! And it was while roving about in all directions looking for you, that poor mother fell down on the door-steps—and died——"

"I remember the incident to which the statement you have just made must refer," said Melmoth. "There was a talk of Vampyrism in that dark room on the night whereof you speak," added the invalid, a low guttural noise like a ferocious chuckle mingling with his words like an under-current of sound, as if a fiend was echoing his words in mockery. "Yes—I remember the occurrence well. But is it possible that you were all sleeping in that room on the particular night in question?"

"Such was the case," replied the lad. "And now pray give me some account of yourself, dear father—and what ails you——"

But at this moment the boy's questions were cut short by the entrance of the surgeon, followed by the regular nurse belonging to the infirmary, and who was a woman somewhat more respectable in appearance though scarcely more agreeable in temper than the repulsive creature who had charge of the place during the night.

"Well, I understand that there is a singular recognition here—eh?" exclaimed the surgeon, who was a person of about five-and-thirty years of age, off-hand in his manner, but by no means harsh nor dictatorial, and as devoted to his profession as any enthusiastic lover of a particular art or science can possibly be. "Poor children!—poor man!" he observed, in a voice through which a tone of sympathy penetrated. "The meeting was a happy one in some respects, doubtless—but in others—— Ah! well," he cried, suddenly interrupting himself and shaking his head solemnly: "we must endeavour to bear up against misfortune in this world."

"It is easy, sir, for those to speak thus who have never known what starvation—houselessness —cold—and weary wanderings are," said Melmoth. "But I thank you for the compassion which your looks imply—and also for the attentions which I have received at your hands during the few days I have been here."

"Well, well—I have done the best I could for you, my man," exclaimed the surgeon. "In the course of a week we shall put you upon your legs again, I haven't the slightest doubt."

"Thank God!" whispered the eldest boy to his brother and sister: "in a week father will be well."

"Meantime," continued the surgeon, "we must take care of these young ones for you. Poor things! they are in a dreadful condition—a dreadful condition! I will place them on the sick list, so that they may be up in the infirmary and able to see you as often as you like. Besides, they can have a little broth and Port wine—and such-like strengthening things—do you hear, Mrs. Bodkin?"

"Yes, sir—I hear, sir," answered the nurse, with a simper. "I'm sure they *do* want Port-wine bad enough, sir, poor things!" she added, as she swept her eyes over the miserable objects huddling near their father's bed: for the woman was always glad when the surgeon ordered wine for the invalids, inasmuch as she invariably appropriated two-thirds of the allowance to her own use.

"Well, then," continued the doctor, "take the children away for the present—send them to the bath—let them have warm clothing—and put them down on the sick list. I'll sign the certificates by and bye."

The children accordingly took a temporary leave of their father;—and the surgeon was left alone with his patient.

CHAPTER CLXXII.

MISS PLANTAGENET.

Scarcely was it daylight when the occupants of the best bed-chamber in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house, rose from their couches and commenced their toilette. The Amazon was full of spirits: for she had slept soundly—had dreamt agreeable things concerning Tim Meagles—and was well pleased with the mission which she had volunteered to undertake to Windsor Castle.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert was somewhat silent and pensive; and the huntress soon began to rally her upon what the harum-scarum creature naturally fancied to be lowness of spirits on the part of the captive lady. As for Miss Plantagenet—she only studied now to keep aloof from that part of the chamber where Letitia was performing her toilette; and thus the young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbert remained together, assisting each other in the details of dressing; whereas it was Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon who had thus stuck close by each other on the preceding evening.

"What ails you this morning, my dear friend?" asked Lady Lade, as she began to imprison her fine bust in the corset which was utterly incompetent to add a tittle to the superb elegance of her shape as a woman, but which was necessary to give the proper "fit" to the frock-coat which she was presently to assume. "You are quite reserved, melancholy, and silent," she continued, peeping round the curtains at Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was not quite so far advanced as herself in the business of the toilette.

"Pray do not think that I am reserved, my dearest friend," said the captive lady. "Reserve towards you would be ingratitude."

"Oh! I did not mean anything so serious as that," exclaimed the Amazon, once more protruding around the curtains that countenance which was so splendidly handsome and so radiant in the natural light of its good-humoured smiles. "But wherefore does Miss Plantagenet avert her head as if I were a gay gallant peeping round at her virgin loveliness?"

"My dear Lady Lade! what are you talking about?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, blushing from the very crown of her head down to the bosom: then, as she hastily began to comb out her long hair of golden flaxiness, she purposely threw it all dishevelled over her shoulders and neck to veil that deep carnation glow which had so suddenly spread beneath her camellia-like skin.

"What am I talking about?" echoed the Amazon, laughing heartily: "surely I have said nothing to shock you, my dear friend? You seem quite confused—and really if I were a young gentleman in female apparel, instead of being a lady in male attire, it would be impossible that *you* could blush more deeply, or Miss Plantagenet conceal herself with more precipitate affright behind the bed-curtains."

"Confused, my dear Lady Lade—I am sure I cannot be confused—I have nothing to be confused at," faultered Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she continued to comb out her back hair, leaving the myriads of shining ringlets hanging over her countenance like a veil.

"Ah! I hear Miss Plantagenet laughing!" cried the Amazon, in the same jocular and good-humoured vein. "Well, I suppose there is some joke which I do not comprehend—or that something has escaped my lips the double purport of which I neither saw nor intended. Have your jests, my dear friends, by all means. I would sooner know that you are making merry, even at my expense, than see you dull, reserved, moping, and miserable."

While thus speaking, the hilarious Amazon put on her frock-coat; and, her toilette being completed, she passed into the sitting-room to assure herself that preparations for breakfast were in progress. The survey of the table being so far satisfactory, she rang the bell to inquire for a porter;—and, when a functionary of that useful class made his appearance, she despatched him up to the West End to order Master Wasp (whom she had taken into her service during the absence of Meagles) to bring down her horse to Chancery Lane with the least possible delay.

Having taken this step, the huntress returned into the bed-chamber for the purpose of hastening her friends with their toilette: and perceiving that Mrs. Fitzherbert was performing some little service for Miss Plantagenet, Letitia very naturally offered to take the pleasing task on herself, so as to leave Mrs. Fitzherbert free to continue dressing without interruption. But Mrs. Fitzherbert would not think of resigning the agreeable duty of aiding Miss Plantagenet; and Miss Plantagenet shrank so much into the obscurest part of the room, that the huntress really began to fancy the young lady's modesty must be of a very extreme and ultra-delicate nature, inasmuch as it recoiled thus affrightedly from the mere aspect of a male costume, although known to be worn by a female. But the huntress was too much occupied with her projected visit to Windsor to bestow much thought upon Miss Plantagenet's peculiarities or the wondrously close friendship which had sprung up between this young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbert;—and returning into the parlour, Letitia looked out of the barred window and hummed an opera air until her two friends, having finished their toilette at last, came to join her at the breakfast-table.

And now it was a fair and pleasant sight to behold these three charming creatures sitting in agreeable companionship and illumining with their bright looks the dusky and cheerless apartment. The Amazon always had a good appetite, and failed not to eat heartily upon the present occasion; while her laugh, so merry and yet so musical, rang frequently through the room, as she still continued to rally both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet on the singularity of their manner. For the former was every instant blushing without any apparent reason—and then the latter seemed to be overwhelmed with confusion;—now they would exchange looks of glowing rapidity but deep meaning—and then, again, they would endeavour to appear as if there were nothing at all peculiar either in their manner or their thoughts.

Lady Letitia was puzzled at all this: but still she was occupying herself as much with the mission which she had in hand, as with the eccentricities of her two companions, although she made them the exclusive subjects of her rattling discourse and hilarious mirth. Nor did she lose time over the breakfast-table: but, having done justice to the meal, she rose from her seat and advanced to the window to see if her equipage had arrived.

It was now nine o'clock; and the morning which had stolen forth in the midst of such unseasonable and even wintry gloom, was rapidly expanding into a sunny brightness more congenial to the period of the year. The thick, foggy, and unwholesome atmosphere of the preceding evening, which had made the rooms in Chancery Lane dark at five o'clock, and which had even endeavoured to stifle or delay the dawn of the day whereof we are now writing, had rapidly yielded to a warmer temperature and a clearer air—so that it really appeared at last as if youthful Spring had achieved her triumph over stern and remorseless Winter and was about to commence her placid reign.

For the incidents of our narrative, dating from the very commencement of January, 1795, and extending over a range of more than three months, have now brought us to the season when the trees begin to put forth their verdure and the singing of birds gladdens the rural scenery with untaught and discordant harmony. Or, to be as particular as possible with chronological details, we may observe that the day whose incidents we have begun to describe, alike in the Whitechapel workhouse and the lock-up in Chancery Lane, bore the date of April 5th.

And it is because this date was a memorable one in the existence of George, Prince of Wales and in the history of the British nation, that we have thus particularized it.

The clocks were striking nine, then, and the sun was beginning to shine with a cheerful and even

potent lustre, as Lady Lade looked forth from the barred window of the sponging-house parlour, while Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet remained still seated at the breakfast-table.

But scarcely had the Amazon stationed herself at the window, thereby turning her back towards her two friends, when the unmistakable sound of a kiss was wafted, in its billing and half-suppressed softness, to her ear. She hastily turned round; and perceiving that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet were covered with confusion at having been thus detected in the furtive token of attachment in which they had just indulged, she burst forth into one of those merry laughs which displayed the ivory beauty of her teeth and enhanced the glow of animation that was natural to her countenance.

But as this incident was uppermost in her mind, and as she looked at Miss Plantagenet, a thought flashed across her brain with the vividness of lightning. That little incident of the kiss was the spark which suddenly kindled a whole train of latent circumstances into the blaze of a startling suspicion;—and by the peculiar expression of mingled wonderment and archness which settled all in a moment upon her handsome countenance, both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet saw that the secret was at least suspected, if not entirely read.

"Oh! this is the most amusing—the most delicious—the most interesting adventure that ever took place!" exclaimed the Amazon, flinging herself upon a seat and bursting into such a hearty peal of merriment that the tears ran down her cheeks.

"What do you mean?—what is it that you allude to?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting up, and speaking in a voice of hysterical hastiness, while the deepest scarlet suffused itself over her face and neck—down to the superb bosom which the morning-wrapper more than half revealed.

"Surely our dear friend has got some strange notion in her head?" observed Miss Plantagenet, also rising from her chair and exerting herself with the tensely straining energy of desperation to surmount the confusion which was overwhelming her.

"Oh! it is delicious—capital—glorious—exquisite!" exclaimed the Amazon, her laugh redoubling its joyousness, and her mirth denoting so much good-humour and such a total absence of anything savouring of maliciousness, that Mrs. Fitzherbert began to feel more assured—or rather, less excruciatingly uncomfortable—and smiles mingled amidst the blushes that covered Miss Plantagenet's countenance.

But in the midst of this curious scene, the door was suddenly opened; and Master Wasp, the young page whom Lady Lade had taken into her service since Meagles' expatriation, appeared upon the threshold.

"Now I will take my departure," cried the Amazon, springing to her feet and subduing her mirth: then, throwing an arch look upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet, she said, "I have not the slightest doubt you will manage to while away the time during my absence. But fear nothing: I am no tale-bearer—the secret is safe——"

"Please your ladyship," interrupted Wasp, speaking in a tone so unusually serious and gloomy that it instantaneously struck upon the Amazon's mind like a presentiment of evil,—"I wish to say a few words to you without delay—and in private," he added, glancing towards Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

"You can speak out, Wasp," exclaimed the huntress. "These ladies are friends of mine—and I have no secrets with them: although," she observed, with another rapid look of slyness at the objects of her remark, "they do not always treat me with the same generous confidence."

"But something very, very serious has happened, my lady," said the young page, who seemed to have totally lost his wonted mischievous sharpness of look and manner.

"Then speak out at once, my boy," exclaimed the Amazon, now paying more attention to that altered demeanour on his part.

"Please your ladyship, Sir John Lade——" faultered the lad, with increased embarrassment of manner and deeper gloom of countenance.

"Ah! what of my husband?" demanded the huntress. "Has he come in person to look after me?—and is he annoyed that I should have stayed away from home all night? If so, he can soon satisfy himself that my time has been passed in the company of two *ladies*," she added, her humourous vein suddenly reviving as she cast a rapid glance of sly significancy upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

"Alas! your ladyship will never see Sir John again—at least—not alive—or in this world," observed Wasp, with a faultering tone.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" cried the Amazon, all remembrance of the incident which had ere now so exquisitely tickled her fancy, vanishing in a moment. "Has anything happened to Sir John?—is he——"

"Dead, my lady," said Wasp, finishing in solemn voice that sentence which her own excitement had prevented her from completing.

"Dead!" ejaculated the Amazon: "is it possible?"

Then, turning aside, she gave way for upwards of a minute to the feelings which this announcement suddenly stirred up in her bosom.

Sir John Lade had given her rank and position in society; and he had endowed her with wealth. She had been his pet and darling—his joy and his pride; and the reader has already seen enough to prove that she was entirely her own mistress and had nothing to apprehend on the score of a husband's jealousy or ill-temper. In sooth, she had been allowed to do just as she chose—to keep whatever hours might happen to suit her—to go out and return home unquestioned and unwatched—and to wear her masculine apparel at her own good will and pleasure. But in return for so much indulgence on her husband's part, what had she done? It was true that her bearing towards him invariably appeared affectionate and tender, and that she sometimes devoted a few hours to him when he wished her to assume the attire becoming her sex and accompany him in the carriage or preside at his dinner-table: but, generally speaking, her time had been spent in pursuits apart from the sympathies and duties of a wife. Mad pranks with dissipated young men—gallantries and intrigues—the connexion with Meagles—and all the various diversions which sustained her cha-

racter alike as an Amazon and as one of the most dissolute beauties of the age,—these had been the features of that unbounded licentiousness with which she had repaid her husband's fond indulgence and foolish confidence.

No wonder, then, that tears now trickled slowly down her cheeks as the whole picture of her career presented itself to her memory and passed before her mental vision with dioramic effect: no wonder that she sighed and felt dull as she reflected that the old man who had loved her so tenderly was no more, and that under whatsoever circumstances he had breathed his last, *she* was not there to receive his parting words nor smooth his dying pillow!

"Tell me, my boy, how *this* happened," said the Amazon, at length turning towards the youthful page, and speaking in a voice that was indeed much changed from the gay hilarity which had so recently thrilled through the room.

"It was a sudden fright, my lady—caused by something which I have yet to explain," observed Wasp.

"Ah! then unpleasant things have occurred?" exclaimed the huntress. "But of what nature could they be? Speak, my boy—and keep me not another moment in suspense."

"Late last night, my lady," resumed Wasp, "two men came to the house and declared that they had an authority to search the premises. I instantly recognised one of those persons——"

"Who was he?" demanded the Amazon.

"Germain, the Prince's French valet," was the reply.

"Ah!—*this* is indeed important!" ejaculated Lady Lade, flinging a glance of mingled interest and trepidation upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose countenance suddenly assumed an expression indicative of the presentiment of evil which simultaneously sprang up in her mind.

"Yes—one was Germain, my lady," resumed Wasp; "and the other announced himself to be a messenger from the Home Office."

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Lade: "what could such a visit portend?"

"They said that your ladyship was suspected to have been leagued with certain seditious individuals whom the authorities had already sent out of the country," continued Wasp; "and as the Habeas Corpus remains suspended, the Home Office had power to enforce search warrants granted by the magistrates in such cases."

"The Prince is at the bottom of all this!" murmured the Amazon, speaking hastily aside to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Perhaps he knows that you are with me, and has conjectured the course which you intended to pursue on my behalf?" observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, from whose cheeks had now fled all the blushes with which the preceding incident of the kiss had suffused them, and whose whole form was quivering with the nervous excitement of mingled suspense and terror. "Oh! he is capable of wreaking upon us the direst revenge—I know he is!" added the unhappy lady shudderingly, as she thus revealed her acquaintance with one of the darkest traits in the character of the Prince.

"Let us hear the end of all this," said the Amazon; "and we shall then know what to think. For my part, I am overwhelmed with consuming terrors concerning the safety of my papers. Go on, boy," she cried, turning again towards Wasp.

"Germain and the messenger came last night at about twelve o'clock," continued the page; "and when Sir John Lade heard the nature of their business, he was seized with a sudden tremor and became speechless. The servants carried him up to bed—the physicians were sent for—but he never spoke again—and in less than an hour——"

"He was a corpse," added the huntress, in a low and mournful voice. "Poor Sir John!" she exclaimed, the accents of compunction vibrating in her tone.

"While that sad scene was taking place in one room," continued Wasp, "the two men were ransacking the furniture and cupboards in all the others."

"And the writing-desk in the safe in my bedchamber?" demanded the huntress, no longer able to restrain her impatience, and yet putting a question to which she dreaded to receive an answer.

"They found it, my lady," said Wasp: "they opened it——"

"Enough!" cried the Amazon: "I wish to hear no more."

"Then your worst fears are confirmed?" whispered Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily.

"Yes—and I am now powerless to assist you at Windsor," responded Lady Lade, in a low deep tone of concentrated rage: then, with a sinister gloom upon her countenance lately so radiant with smiles, and her fine white teeth closely set, she whispered hissingly, "But I will be revenged, as sure as there is a God in heaven!"

Both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet gazed upon the Amazon in dismay: for there was something ferociously terrible in her manner, her look, and her gesture as she gave utterance to that dark menace.

And it was at this crisis in the scene, that a carriage drove up to the door of the sponging-house, the arrival of which instantaneously attracted the inmates of the room to the barred window.

"Two ladies have alighted," said Mrs. Fitzherbert: "but they entered the house so abruptly that I could not distinguish their faces."

"But whose carriage is it?" demanded the Amazon.

"There are no arms upon the panels," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and yet I should know that livery——Oh! if they be really visitors for me," she exclaimed, suddenly recollecting herself and turning round in affright towards Miss Plantagenet.

And this young lady was about to beat a precipitate retreat into the bed-room adjoining, when the door of the parlour itself was flung open by the obsequious Mr. Crimp—and the Duchess of Devonshire, accompanied by the Countess of Desborough, entered the apartment.

CHAPTER CLXXIII.

FRESH SCENES IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

MRS. FITZHERBERT was for an instant on the point of shrieking out and becoming overwhelmed with confusion—for she knew that the Duchess of Devon-

shire was at least certain, even if the Countess of Desborough was not likewise sure, to recognise Miss Plantagenet: but the desperate emergency of the case armed her with a sudden presence of mind the strength of which astonished even herself;—and springing forward, as if in the exuberance of a joyous gratitude to welcome her friends, she endeavoured to cover Miss Plantagenet's retreat into the adjacent room.

But the move was too late. For, quick as the glance only can pierce the air, did the Duchess of Devonshire instantaneously recognise Miss Plantagenet's features: and, darting forward, she caught the flying young lady by the arm, exclaiming, "Cousin! what masquerade mummery is this?"

"Hush, for God's sake!" whispered Miss Plantagenet, in a low but rapid tone, and accompanying the words with an imploring look.

At the same moment Mrs. Fitzherbert sprang forward to meet the Countess of Desborough; and that presence of mind on her part, by instantaneously engrossing Eleanor's attention, prevented her from observing the singular little bye-play which was taking place between the Duchess of Devonshire and Miss Plantagenet.

Meantime Wasp had withdrawn from the room—and the Amazon was only waiting until she could obtain an opportunity to wish Mrs. Fitzherbert farewell.

"Hush, for God's sake!" were the words which Miss Plantagenet had whispered in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as we have above stated.

"What mummery is this, I demand?" inquired Georgiana, still preventing the young lady from beating a retreat, but dropping her own voice to that same tone of caution the infection of which she instantaneously caught.

"I will explain it all another time—do not betray me—but let me go ere the Countess recognises me," urged Miss Plantagenet, with accents and looks of fervid entreaty, as she strove to break away from the Duchess.

At that moment Eleanor, having exchanged greetings with Mrs. Fitzherbert, cast her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet; and the young lady could not therefore possibly beat the retreat which she was on the point of accomplishing, because such a proceeding would have been a flagrant rudeness and in itself calculated to excite the strangest suspicions.

"Introduce me as Miss Plantagenet," was the hasty whisper which she breathed in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as she perceived Eleanor's eyes fixed upon her.

"My dear Countess," said Georgiana, with a smile so good-humouredly arch and a manner so softly frolicksome that it was evident she was enjoying the very good joke which she did not however mean to betray,—"my dear Countess, permit me to introduce you to my fair cousin, Miss Plantagenet—a young lady of whom you have doubtless never heard before, inasmuch as she has only recently arrived in London——"

"Indeed, I am almost certain that I have had the honour of meeting Miss Plantagenet on some former occasion," observed the Countess of Desborough, fixing her eyes upon the young lady with that expression of uncertainty and inquiry which showed that she was vainly taxing her memory to discover where she had seen those features before.

"It is possible that we may have met," said Miss Plantagenet, with her softest voice and most agreeable manner: "for this is not the first time that I have visited London——Indeed!" she exclaimed, as if struck by a sudden reminiscence, but really catching at the idea to which she was about to give utterance, because she thought that she perceived the earnestness of Eleanor's looks deepening into suspicion,—"indeed, it was at our mutual friend Mrs. Fitzherbert's apartments in Carlton House that we met."

"I do not recollect it," observed the Countess of Desborough—as indeed it would have been very singular if she had. "But it may be as you say, Miss Plantagenet. At all events, I am very certain that we *have* met before somewhere: for your features—pardon the personality of the remark—are as familiar to me as possible."

"And now, wherever it may be that we met before," said Miss Plantagenet, "on the present occasion we encounter each other under circumstances of a somewhat gloomy nature. Our dear friend here," and she looked towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, "has been the victim of cruel persecution——"

"Let us not touch upon the past, in any way," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert emphatically: then, having suffered the most excruciating terror throughout the little dialogue which had just taken place between Miss Plantagenet and the Countess of Desborough on their introduction to each other, and anxious to turn the general attention as well as the discourse into other channels, she said, "But I had really forgotten to present you to Lady Lade, who has behaved towards me with the most signal, marked, and sister-like conduct—at a time, too, when all my friends appeared to have forsaken me."

"I was out of town, my dear Mrs. Fitzherbert, when your letter was delivered three or four days ago," said the Duchess of Devonshire, as she bestowed a slight and haughty inclination of the head upon the Amazon.

"And I was down at Stamford Manor until last night," added the Countess of Desborough, with an equally cold and reserved acknowledgment of Lady Lade.

A curl of sovereign contempt appeared for an instant upon the lips of the beautiful huntress, as she observed how unwelcome her presence was and how unpalatable this introduction appeared to be to the two patrician ladies.

"And now, my dear friend," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, turning hastily towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, "do let us take you away from this horrid place at once. Eleanor and myself have united the contents of our purses for your use——But pray do get rid of that notorious character, Lady Lade," she added, suddenly interrupting herself and sinking her voice to the lowest possible whisper.

"I was much afflicted to hear of your embarrassments, when I came up to town last evening," said the Countess of Desborough: "and at daybreak this morning I arose—started off to Devonshire House—and was pleased to find that our friend Georgiana was meditating an immediate visit to you. So we forthwith came together——But what on earth is Lady Lade doing here?" suddenly demanded Eleanor, dropping her voice to a whisper in the same way as the Duchess had done a moment before.

"Pray be civil to Lady Lade," hastily murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of earnest entreaty, to the magnificent Duchess and the brilliant Countess: "she possesses an excellent heart——"

At that instant the door was opened hurriedly; and Wasp rushed in, exclaiming, "The Prince is coming! He has just entered the office down stairs and is asking the bailiff some questions!"

"The Prince!" shrieked Mrs. Fitzherbert in a dying voice, as she turned towards Miss Plantagenet.

"I shall not remain to meet his Royal Highness," said the Countess of Desborough, her countenance flushing with a sudden indignation as she thought of the outrage which the Prince had sought to perpetrate towards her on the memorable night of the grand ball at Carlton House.

"Then do you take my cousin away with you, Eleanor," said the Duchess of Devonshire, pushing both the Countess and Miss Plantagenet into the bed-room, the door of which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just shown presence of mind enough to open.

And as the door of the bed-chamber closed behind the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, George Prince of Wales entered the sitting-room.

Wasp, the nimble page, shut the door behind him and withdrew down stairs again;—and his Royal Highness, taking off the hat which was slouched over his face, and turning down the fur collar of his cloak which had been drawn up so as to conceal all the lower part of his countenance, threw a rapid glance around to ascertain who were present.

Not deigning to take any notice of the Amazon, and only bowing with stately politeness to Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Prince extended his hand to the Duchess of Devonshire, observing in a careless sort of manner, "I did not expect to meet your Grace here."

"But I *did* expect to have heard that your Royal Highness had been here long ere this," said Georgiana, the natural generosity of her disposition prompting this remonstrance against his unfeeling conduct towards her friend Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"There are circumstances which do not always transpire in particular cases," said the Prince, with a cold look at *her* who was his wife in the sight of heaven,—"but which, if known, would alter the aspect of affairs"

Mrs. Fitzherbert started—grew red with indignation—and was about to speak: but suddenly recollecting that the Prince was aware of her amour with the Marquis de Bellois, and with the image of Miss Plantagenet likewise springing up into her mind, she felt herself suddenly grow pale as death, while her limbs became cold as marble and an icy tremor shook her entire form.

"I cannot conceive the existence of any circumstances which could induce your Royal Highness to leave our dear Fitzherbert for even as many hours as she has been days in this horrible place," said the Duchess of Devonshire, bravely and generously following up her first remonstrance by this second reproach.

"Perhaps your dear friend, in whom you are so deeply interested and whose part you take so warmly, will bestow her full confidence upon your Grace," observed his Royal Highness, with a scorching sarcasm in his tone and manner, as he threw another look pregnant with meaning upon the unhappy lady who was the object of his cowardly brutality.

"Ah! have I not loved you enough and made sacrifices enough for you, to induce you to be merciful?" she said, in a tone of deepest pathos and with such an appealing look from her fine blue eyes that, however great her frailties might have been, the anguished earnestness of that remonstrance was enough to have moved a heart of stone.

"As I am here to treat matters in purely a business-like point of view," returned the Prince, totally inaccessible to any generous feeling on her behalf, "it would perhaps be as well to avoid any extraneous comment. At all events, any revelations that may be made, will have been wilfully *provoked*—and not idly *volunteered*: even," he added with a malicious smile, "should the name of Miss Plantagenet be brought upon the *tapis*."

The Duchess of Devonshire started and bit her lip: for she now saw that the Prince, by some unaccountable means, had become aware of that secret—and she therefore comprehended a portion of the allusions which he had just been making and which poor Mrs. Fitzherbert had understood only too well. As for this unhappy lady herself, she was crushed—overwhelmed—annihilated by the last observation which had fallen from the Prince's lips, and which proved that even the mystery of the sponging-house, as we may denominate the Plantagenet affair, was known to him.

Pale as a corpse—her eyes fixed, yet staring wildly—with fire in the brain and ice at the heart, Mrs. Fitzherbert staggered back against the wall: otherwise she would have sunk down upon the floor.

"Has your Royal Highness any compliments to bestow upon *me* in my turn?" demanded the Amazon, who had hitherto been leaning against the bars of the window, with folded arms, and paying only a dim and misty kind of attention to all that was going on in her presence—her thoughts being chiefly occupied with the intelligence of her husband's death and the feelings the event had excited in her bosom.

"I presume you are aware of what has occurred at your own abode?" said the Prince, turning in a half-disdainful, half-indifferent manner towards her, as if he had his doubts whether he ought to notice her at all.

"I am aware that a couple of ruffians sent by your Royal Highness not only frightened an old man to death by their brutality," said the Amazon, with dauntless tone and manner,—"but likewise ravaged the whole house for the object of their predatory visit."

"The persons whom your slanderous tongue libels as ruffians, were armed with legal authority," observed the Prince, with the haughty confidence and triumphant arrogance of a man who feels that he has got the best of his enemies. "They performed the duty that was assigned to them—and they retook possession of certain documents which had been scandalously and infamously plundered from me. Those documents, Lady Lade," added his Royal Highness, with mingled bitterness and ferocious joy, "are placed beyond your reach for ever! Neither stratagem nor violence can obtain them from *me*:

beware, then, how you attempt either! As for the death of your husband, I do not think that you have been so exemplary a wife as to give proof of any wondrous amount of affection for the old man."

"I am well aware that your Royal Highness is totally indifferent to a human life or two more or less," remarked the Amazon, her red lip curling in withering scorn; "the suicide of Foster the merchant, for example."

"Shall we blurt forth in alternate volleys all we know of each other?" asked the Prince, who for a moment had started, turned pale, and bitten his lip as that tremendous allusion was hurled at his head. "But perhaps you have no wish that I should proceed to rake in the mire and filth of Lukner's Lane, in order to discover the origin of a certain Letitia Fluke?"

"Your Royal Highness has nevertheless made that same person the companion of your mirthful hours within the gilded walls of Carlton House," retorted the Amazon, in a tone of cool contempt and without the slightest indication of annoyance.

"Yes—because I was anxious to hear her recite some of the amusing rascalities of one of her earliest paramours, the celebrated Jack Rann who was executed at Tyburn," observed the Prince, nettled at the placid indifference with which the Amazon received his taunts.

"Your Royal Highness has profited well by such teachings," rejoined Lady Lade, still unmoved and slightly contemptuous: "for the very debates in the House of Commons upon your Royal Highness's debts, afford ample proof that the rascalities for which Jack Rann was hanged were mere trifles to the rascalities which your Royal Highness perpetrates with impunity."

"By the living God! *this* to the heir-apparent to the throne?" exclaimed the Prince, becoming purple for a moment and then turning white as a sheet.

"Yes—and a great deal more too," cried the dauntless Amazon, "if your Royal Highness be agreeable to continue this warfare of taunt and repartee."

"I have already forgotten myself enough," said the Prince, now recovering his wonted dignity. "Hark you, Lady Lade: we may as well come to an understanding together, as we now fight upon more equal grounds than when last we met."

"Do not think that because you have regained possession of the papers, I am completely in your power," observed the huntress. "Remember that the secrets contained in those documents are treasured up *here*;" —and she tapped her forehead significantly with the handle of her riding-whip.

"The secrets, without the documentary proofs to back them," said the Prince, "would be looked upon as mere scandal and idle tittle-tattle. Nevertheless, I do not wish to provoke your animosity farther than it may be already excited;—and therefore let there be at least a cessation of hostilities between us. I have got back my papers: in two or three weeks you will have back your Meagles—and let that suffice you."

"I accept the armistice," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' reflection: then advancing towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was now conversing in a low tone with the Duchess of Devonshire, she said, "Madam, I bid you farewell. Should it ever be in my power to render you a service, you will find me willing to do so—if it be only to make suitable atonement for the wrong which Meagles inflicted upon you. Farewell!"

"Farewell, dear Lady Lade," returned Mrs. Fitzherbert, who, now that the Amazon was unable to assist her in obtaining a high title and a large pension, would not have appeared quite so friendly towards the good-natured huntress, were it not on account of the little secret touching and concerning Miss Plantagenet.

Lady Lade then bowed to the Duchess of Devonshire and took her departure.

"Now, madam," said the Prince, turning towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, the instant that the door had closed behind the widowed huntress, "I request your attention for a few minutes. From the observations which I ere now made, you have learnt that I am well informed upon certain matters, and that therefore I cannot possibly regret our separation. More explicit I do not wish to be—unless it were to observe that I came hither this morning for the purpose of ascertaining whether certain information which *I* received were really true, and that under the name and garb of *Miss Plantagenet*——"

"Wherefore say more upon that head?" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire. "The breach between yourself and Fitzherbert is past all power of healing; and it is evidently unnecessary to widen it. A grand change is about to take place in the position of your Royal Highness—your future bride arrived last evening in the Thames—to-day she comes to London——"

"Ah! then the event draws nigh?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone indicative of deep emotion. "One wife in a prison—another in a palace——"

"Speak not in these terms!" exclaimed the Prince, bending harsh and angry looks upon the unhappy lady. "Whatever you may have been to me, you are nothing now. Nor can you be at a loss to comprehend my motives for saying this. The bare mention of the town of Plombiers should bring the burning blush to your cheeks——"

"Ah! this is cruel," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, covering her face with her hands—while the Duchess of Devonshire, who knew nothing of her friend's amour with the Marquis of Bellois, was at a loss to conceive the meaning of the allusion which had just affected her so powerfully.

"But as if *that* were not enough," continued the Prince, in a louder and more angry tone, "you entice hither your Lady Lades to plot with you, and your Miss Plantagenets——But, when I think of it," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "I should like to see how that maudlin sentimentalist, with all the sickly devotion of love and worship towards Miss Pauline Clarendon——"

And while he was yet speaking, his Royal Highness opened the bed-room door and walked into that chamber.

But he was disappointed in his hope of finding Miss Plantagenet there; and an open door, leading upon the landing, at once explained by which means the bird had flown.

"I learnt from the man down-stairs that *two* ladies had arrived in the carriage which I saw waiting outside," observed the Prince, returning into the parlour and addressing himself to the Duchess of Devonshire: "but the fellow did not know who the ladies were. *You* are one, Georgiana:—who was the *other?*"

"The Countess of Desborough accompanied me," was the immediate reply, given without a moment's reflection that there might be any harm in thus associating Eleanor's name with the sponging-house adventures.

"Now I presume her ladyship has gone away with Miss Plantagenet!" exclaimed the Prince: "is it not so? Ah! I see by your countenance, Georgiana, that I have guessed the truth! Upon my honour, this is capital—delicious!"

"But Eleanor," began the Duchess, by way of defending the Countess from any imputation which the Prince might fancy to throw upon her,—"does not for an instant suspect that her companion——"

"Better and better!" cried the Prince, in the exultation of a malicious glee. "Oh! this is admirable—admirable! The haughty Eleanor of Desborough undertaking to become the protectress and *chaperon* of Miss Plantagenet—from the door of a sponging-house to any other house into which the said Miss Plantagenet may choose to lead her ladyship——"

"Really your Royal Highness does not appear to have much use for your time, since you can afford to waste it in such idle scurrility," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire: for she was not only inclined to become the championess of her absent friend from those motives which in such a case prompt one woman to defend another; but she was likewise annoyed and disgusted at the whole tenour of the Prince's conduct on the present occasion. "To come to the point at once," she said, after a few moments' pause, "do you intend to release Fitzherbert from her present embarrassments, or leave that duty to be performed by her friends?"

"I have come hither to make Mrs. Fitzherbert a certain proposal," replied the Prince: then, drawing forth a packet of letters from beneath his cloak, and displaying them before the eyes of that lady, he said, "I presume, madam, that you recognise this correspondence?"

"I do," answered Mrs. Fitzherbert, instantaneously perceiving that the Prince held in his hand all the letters which she had sent to the Marquis de Bellois: and the blood rushed to her cheeks, a moment before so pale!

"The next step for me to take," continued the Prince of Wales, "is to count down five Bank-notes of a thousand pounds each. There is the amount! And now," he added, opening a paper which he took from his waistcoat pocket, "here is a short deed setting forth and declaring that no marriage-ceremony nor any matrimonial rite was ever performed in any church, chapel, or private house, by any clergyman or priest of whatsoever denomination, between Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself——"

"And what is the object of that document?" demanded the lady, with feverish impatience.

"It is for you to sign, madam," responded the Prince, with the calm assurance of a man who knows that he can carry matters with a high hand against all opposition.

"Never!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her quivering lips becoming as bloodless as her countenance, while her whole form trembled visibly.

"Then listen, madam, to the observations I am about to make," said his Royal Highness. "Circumstances place me in a desperate position—and the proceedings I shall adopt will prove of an equally desperate character. Fortunately the authority of the Home Office backs me at this moment: otherwise, perhaps, *you* and my other enemies might stand a chance of triumphing over me. You refuse to sign this paper? Be it so: but I must warn you of the consequences."

"Dare you threaten me?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, partially recovering her presence of mind in the face of the cold-blooded, brutal, heartless tyrant whose head had so often lain pillowed upon her bosom and upon whom she had been wont to lavish such tender caresses.

"I dare speak what I mean—aye, and perform what I threaten," he exclaimed, a sardonic smile for an instant wavering upon his lips, and proving that there was a tinge of fiendish malignity mingled amongst the other dark shades of his character. "Know, then, that if you refuse your signature to this document, madam, I shall at once release you from this place of captivity—but it will only be to have you hurried on board a ship and transported to North America! Remember that the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended; and your forced exile may be accomplished safely, securely, and immediately. The world will believe that the once gay and brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert has voluntarily fled the country in order to avoid the consequences of those debts with which she is overwhelmed;—and should any satirist, pamphleteer, or scandal-monger, dare to publish aught wherein *her* name and *mine* are inconveniently associated, the correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois shall be printed and issued so that a true light may be thrown on the character of Mrs. Fitzherbert! What would the world say then? Why, that I—the Prince of Wales—had been made the dupe of a vile, profligate, intriguing woman;—and while all the indignation would be levelled against *you*, madam, all the sympathy would redound upon *me*. Then, with such a state of public feeling, of what utility would it be for *your* friends to publish anything *more* relative to our past connexion and its true nature? The popular voice would drown the echoes of any complaints which your adherents in this country might raise, while *you* would be powerless in a far-off clime! And if in addition to the revelations which your correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois contains, anything be wanting to convince the world of your real character, the incidents of the sponging-house——"

"Enough—enough!" murmured the unhappy woman, in a hoarse thick voice: for she felt the truth—the crushing, overpowering truth—of all the consequences which the heir-apparent thus mercilessly shadowed forth.

"In the name of heaven, let this scene draw to a speedy close!" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, who was deeply affected on the one hand and incensed on the other—for while she pitied Mrs. Fitzherbert from the bottom of her soul, she was disgusted at the heartless conduct of the Prince.

"I am in his power—I am at his mercy," said the persecuted lady, clinging to the arm of the Duchess and bursting into tears. "Oh! what do you advise, Georgiana?—what shall I do?"

"Give your signature to the document, my dear friend," hastily whispered the Duchess: "resistance will be useless—opposition will ruin you altogether!"

"But he dares not perpetrate all the frightful outrages he has threatened," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily drawing Georgiana aside.

"You see that his position is desperate—and he will do *anything* and *everything* that circumstances may suggest," was the reply given by the Duchess of Devonshire in the same low and scarcely audible tone as that in which Mrs. Fitzherbert had spoken.

"Well, what is the decision?" demanded the Prince, turning back again from the window to which he had advanced while the preceding colloquy of a few moments was hurriedly whispered between the two ladies.

"I will sign the paper," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a low and almost sepulchral tone, and with such an unnatural calmness of demeanour that it was positively more frightful to behold than the wildest rage could possibly have been: for it appeared as if a volcano were ready to burst forth from beneath that surface so terrible in its tranquillity.

Then seating herself at the table, and with a hand that was steadied by the nerve of desperation, she affixed her signature to the paper: but the moment that her name was traced thereon—indeed, before the eye had time to wink after the last letter of the word *Fitzherbert* was formed—she dashed down the pen with a frantic gesture, exclaiming as she started wildly from her seat, "There! I have sold myself as completely as if it were to Satan!"

Aye—and like Satan, too, did his Royal Highness smile with a malignant triumph as he snatched up the document from within the reach of the now fearfully excited lady; and spreading it open upon the opposite side of the table, he said, "Now, Georgiana, you will have the kindness to attest it."

"I will have nothing to do with it!" exclaimed the Duchess, her countenance suddenly glowing with indignation, as she drew her magnificent form proudly up to its full height and cast a look of haughty anger upon the Prince.

"Then the bailiff must be summoned to attest the deed—that's all," observed his Royal Highness, with cool insolence.

"Ah! spare me this crowning indignity, Georgiana!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Let us yield to the despotic will of——that heartless man," she added, the words hissing between her lips with the spite of a serpent.

"If it be your desire that I should sign the paper, my dearest friend," cried the Duchess, "I will do so: but not unless."

"Yes—better *your* attestation, Georgiana, than that of a stranger who will make the contents of this deed the subject of his tavern-talk," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a thrilling acrimony in her tone.

The Duchess accordingly affixed her signature as witness to the deed, which the Prince instantly took up and secured about his person. He then pointed to the Bank-notes which lay upon the table—resumed his cloak and hat—bowed coldly and distantly to the two ladies—and quitted the room.

An hour afterwards Mrs. Fitzherbert, attended by one of the Duchess of Devonshire's lady's-maids, was proceeding in a travelling-carriage to her Grace's villa near Aylesbury, in which retirement the unhappy lady determined to remain until the bustle of the Prince's marriage should be over.

But, Oh! was it not with an aching heart and a reeling brain that she was now compelled to contemplate the overthrow of all her dearest hopes?—was it not with a deep, deep bitterness that in her soul she cursed that weakness on her part which had so seriously compromised her with the Marquis of Bellois and also in the affair of the self-styled Miss Plantagenet, as to enable her royal husband to seize upon those incidents as weapons to turn against herself?

Ruined—crushed—trampled under foot by the man who had so lately appeared to cherish her, the unhappy lady found but a partial relief in the floods of tears which the agonising sense of her fallen condition now wrung from her eyes, as she was whirled along the road towards that place of seclusion whither her wounded pride prompted her to fly!

CHAPTER CLXXIV.

LADY JERSEY.

On quitting the sponging-house, the Prince of Wales muffled himself up in his cloak in such a manner as to conceal his countenance so as to escape recognition; and in a few minutes he entered a plain carriage which was waiting for him near the bottom of Chancery Lane. He immediately ordered the coachman to drive to St. James's Palace, where the King, Queen, Princes, and Princesses—in fine, all the Royal Family—were assembled to receive Caroline of Brunswick, who was expected in a few hours. The Prince of Wales sought an immediate interview with his father *alone;* and when they were together, his Royal Highness handed him the document which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just signed in the sponging-house.

"There, sire, is the paper which you demanded of me," said the Prince. "It contains the acknowledgment on a certain lady's part——"

"Which I wanted—eh?" interrupted the King. "Well, well—I am glad of that—glad of that: and now Pitt will not hesitate to get your debts paid for you."

Some farther discourse took place upon this occasion, and upon that topic, between the King and the Prince: but it is unnecessary to place it upon record. We may however observe that his Majesty, after a long interview of two hours with his son, recommended that he should return to Carlton House and compose his thoughts so as to be enabled to meet the Princess of Brunswick with a smiling countenance. To this proposal the heir-apparent cheerfully assented: but instead of repairing homeward, he went and amused himself at a private billiard-table for an hour. He then drove to Carlton House, it being now two o'clock in the afternoon: and, on arriving there, he learnt from Germain that the Countess of Jersey was in one of the drawing-rooms.

"Ah! then the Princess has arrived in London?" murmured the heir-apparent, with a tightening sensation at the heart: and, throwing off his hat and cloak, he at once proceeded to the apartment where Lady Jersey was anxiously waiting to see him.

This lady, who has not been hitherto introduced to our readers, was one of the numerous mistresses of the royal voluptuary.

Her beauty was of that dark, warm, and glowing style which invests its possessor with an air of eternal youthfulness and defies the ravages both of dissipation and time. Thus even the closest observer of the phases of woman's appearance at the different stages of her life, would have been able to hazard no nearer conjecture relative to the age of Lady Jersey than that she was between thirty and forty—but whether nearer the former or the latter point, it was impossible to decide. And yet that conjecture would have been erroneous: for she was now in her forty-second year!

She was tall and exquisitely formed—a little inclined to stoutness, and yet not too much to impair the gracefulness of her movements or the elegance of her figure. Her bust was grandly developed, as was usually the case with all the Prince's favourites: but her waist was naturally delicate without the need of undue compression;—and her limbs were exquisitely modelled, so as to give grace to her attitudes and render her walk light and her bearing dignified and imposing. In her person were thus united the luxuriousness of full and glowing charms and the elegant flexibility which rendered her as brilliantly attractive in the dance as she was fitted by nature and appearance for amorous dalliance and sensuous enjoyment.

The warmth of her temperament was indeed evident in every turn and expression of her features, where a voluptuous softness was mingled with a bolder and more decided look, denoting strength of mind and an unprincipled character. But over these indications of mental power and evil passions, that languishing ardour which arose from her sen-

suous nature threw so delicious a gloss that the impression her appearance left upon the observer was that of a woman formed for love and pleasure and too indolent in her luxurious imagination to direct her thoughts to intrigues of any less tender character.

Her complexion was a clear olive, with a carnation tint of health upon the cheeks, which were plump and yet soft to the eye: the lips were of the brightest scarlet and slightly pouting, bearing the appearance of a delicious fruit in its full ripeness and with a dew upon it;—the teeth were faultlessly even, all perfect in number, and white as ivory;—the nose was aquiline and beautifully formed, with nostrils of the delicate red of the rose-leaf;—and the chin was sweetly rounded.

The neck of this splendid creature was long and arching. A gradual slope formed the broad chest, whence the bosoms rose grandly like two globes of the lightest bronze with the pinky tint of warm, glowing, living flesh. The shoulders, plump and full, had likewise their beauteous slope;—and the arms were modelled in a symmetry that could not possibly be surpassed.

Her hair, which was of darkest sable, had that gentle and scarcely perceptible undulation which denotes the fervour of the blood and the thirst for voluptuous pleasures. A rich gloss was upon it, making an alternation of light and shade with the wavy surface that was of such velvet smoothness to the touch. Her eyes were black; and they shone, in their blueish liquid whites, beneath the jetty fringes which overhung them in silken length and thickness.

Her hand was incomparably beautiful. The fingers were long and tapering; and the nails were of the fine almond shape, with the rosy tinge of vigorous health leaving the crescent, where they joined the flesh at the bottom, of pellucid whiteness. Beneath the transparent olive skin of the superb arms might be seen the faint blue tracery of the veins—those veins in which the blood ran hot and furious!

Her feet and ankles were as faultless as her hands;—and when she stood either in the dignity of her rank or in the grace of her womanhood, the eye would wander with an inexpressible feeling of delight over the flowing outlines of that form which gave just so much shapeliness to its drapery as to afford an idea of the rich contours and the symmetrical length of limb that it concealed. No—not altogether concealed: for, according to the fashion of the times; Lady Jersey wore her dress so low as to display at least all the upper half of her glowing bust, while her arms were entirely bare.

This lady had a very kind and indulgent husband who entertained not the least objection to his wife being the known and all but acknowledged mistress of the heir-apparent. Had this same Lord Jersey found her out in an intrigue with a lacquey or any other plebeian, he would instantaneously have thrust her forth in ignominy from his abode, and appealed, with all the energy of an outraged husband, to the proper tribunals for a divorce. But as it was to Royalty that his spouse thus prostituted herself, and as it was with the heir-apparent to the British throne that she became an adulteress, his lordship actually looked upon the noble lady's shame as a source of immense honour to himself!

Again, had Lady Jersey been only suspected of an intrigue with a valet, she would have been excluded from all decent society in a moment: but being the harlot of the Prince of Wales, she was courted, flattered, worshipped, and caressed, by all the members, male and female, of the world of fashion.

That she was as intriguing in other matters as she was in love, we may safely proclaim to be a fact; and that she was as dangerous as she was beautiful, and as designing as she was captivating, are truths known to all who are in the least acquainted with the history of the British Court.

Such was the syren who was now waiting to see the Prince, and who was lounging on a sofa in the drawing-room at Carlton House when his Royal Highness made his appearance on his return from the billiard-table.

"Well, what tidings, my sweet friend?" demanded the Prince impatiently, as he snatched a kiss from Lady Jersey's pouting lips.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick has just arrived in London," responded the fair patrician, her words flowing in a voice of rich harmony but in the measured tone which an ill-concealed spite imparted to her utterance.

"You have been with her—you have seen her—you have conversed with her," said the Prince, his manner indicating a mixture of painful suspense and excitement. "You can now, then, tell me everything—and yet I dread to ask you a single question! Oh! I am haunted with wretched, wretched presentiments concerning this marriage! But in one word, my dear Frances—in one word tell me," exclaimed the heir-apparent, with a strange abruptness of both voice and manner,—"is *she* a fit wife for *me*?"

The lady raised her countenance towards the Prince with an expression of mingled commiseration and alarm; but we need hardly say that this was an air which she assumed in order to pique his curiosity the more acutely and render his suspense the more profoundly poignant—for she was a very serpent in the aptitude of duplicity, and her guile was the more dangerous because her winning and seductive manner invested it with all the semblance of truth. Thus were her artifices rendered irresistibly insidious by the appearance of sincerity in which she clothed them; and not only was she an adept in disguising the most venomous sentiments in the most honied language, but her dupes would drink in the poison of her looks and fancy that it was a delicious balm which those eyes so full of seeming tenderness were pouring into the heart!

Thus, when she now raised her charming countenance in a half sympathising, half deprecating manner towards the Prince, as she sate upon a voluptuous sofa, and he stood in nervous trepidation before the fire,—and when he saw that look into which she threw just enough pity to startle him, and just enough apprehension to torture him with suspense,—it never for an instant struck him that all this was a mere wicked affectation on the part of Lady Jersey.

"My dearest friend," he murmured, in a tone deeply agitated, "will you answer the question which I put to you?"

"And that question?" said Lady Jersey interrogatively, as if she wished to gain time ere she gave a response.

"I demand once more," cried the Prince, now goaded almost to desperation, "whether you consider *her*—the Princess, I mean—a fit wife for me?"

"No—I do not," replied Lady Jersey, speaking as if she had only brought herself by means of a great and repugnant effort to give utterance to such a response.

"Deal candidly with me," said the Prince, in a low deep voice, as he placed himself by the side of his mistress upon the sofa. "My brother the Duke of Clarence, who saw the Princess the year before last at Brunswick, has given me a glowing account of her beauty, her amiability, and her accomplishments. Moreover, a private letter which I received from Brunswick yesterday, assures me that the Princess is altogether very pleasing in personal appearance—that her bust is good—that her teeth are fine—that her eyes are full of intelligence—that her bearing is dignified and majestic—and that her manners are characterised by sweetness, condescension, and affability. Such is the report which I have received: in an hour or two I shall be enabled to judge for myself. But do, dear Jersey—do, in the meantime, delineate the portraiture of the Princess according to the conception which you have formed—and tell me frankly, candidly, and unreservedly why you do not consider her a fitting wife for me."

"Yes—I will speak unreservedly, since you wish it, George," said that fiend-like woman who wore so angelic a shape: and as she breathed those words with a voice and manner of the utmost apparent sincerity, she allowed her delicate hand to play caressingly with the Prince's hair.

"Proceed, dearest," observed his Royal Highness, flattered by the seemingly improvised token of fondness thus bestowed upon him. "Explain to me frankly all your impressions concerning my future wife."

"And all I have heard likewise?" said her ladyship, in a tone of inquiry which seemed full of artlessness.

"Yes—and all you have heard, provided it be from good authority," added his Royal Highness. "But pray keep me not in suspense."

"I will not—because I love you, George—and I sympathise with you," returned Lady Jersey, fixing upon him a look of burning desire. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that Mrs. Aston, Lord Claremont, and myself, in pursuance of your instructions, repaired yesterday to Greenwich to receive her Royal Highness on her landing. The royal yacht did not however arrive at Greenwich from Gravesend until about ten o'clock this morning; and the Princess landed at the Hospital. Her Royal Highness was received by the Governor, who had refreshments prepared; and I was then enabled to study the appearance of the Princess with some degree of attention. Her countenance may certainly be called pretty: but it is not expessive of either softness or intelligence. Her eyes are fine, but have a bold look. Her teeth are good in front; but the back ones are decayed——"

"You do not mean *that?*" exclaimed the Prince, starting with an irrepressible feeling of disgust.

"I not only observed it when her Royal Highness laughed heartily, which she did on two or three occasions during the luncheon," said Lady Jersey; "but Mrs. Harcourt, the Bed-chamber Woman who has accompanied her Royal Highness from Brunswick, subsequently assured me that such was the fact. Indeed—if I dared mention the anecdote ——But no——"

"Tell me what is now uppermost in your mind, Frances—I insist upon it!" exclaimed the Prince, with passionate vehemence. "Nay—I even command you," he added, in a still more excited manner when he saw that her ladyship was hesitating.

"But the anecdote was told to me in strict confidence by Mrs. Harcourt," urged the syren, thus artfully goading the Prince's curiosity to an intolerable degree of poignancy.

"And you will likewise tell it to me in strict confidence," was the heir-apparent's rejoinder.

"Well, if you force me to be thus explicit, I must yield," said the designing creature, affecting to heave a profound sigh. "The truth is, then, that during the journey from Brunswick—or rather when the royal party was stopping at Osnabruck—the Princess had a decayed tooth drawn; and she sent it, wrapped up in a piece of paper, to Lord Malmesbury."*

"By God! if this were really true!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, springing from the sofa in a state of almost wild excitement.

"I have told you the anecdote, George, precisely as it was related to me," said Lady Jersey, assuming a low and mournful tone, as if she were grieved at having been compelled to repeat such a tale.

"Oh! this is too much—too much!" cried the Prince, now pacing to and fro in the greatest agitation. "Such a piece of disgusting indelicacy affords a key to the reading of the entire character of this woman whom I am expected to cherish as my wife! But I must compose myself—I must subdue my feelings——"

"Yes, you must summon all your courage and presence of mind to your aid, my well-beloved friend," said the Countess of Jersey, now approaching the Prince and taking his hand gently in both her own.

"Then you have more to tell me?" he exclaimed, suffering her to lead him back to the sofa. "And now proceed, Jersey—tell me me all—everything!" he added, as soon as they were again seated side by side.

"I was describing to you the Princess's personal appearance," resumed the artful lady. "Her hair is what may politely and flatteringly be called a light auburn: but, were it seen upon the head of a servant girl, we should plainly and undisguisedly denominate it red. Her eye-brows are very light—indeed she has scarcely any. Her nose is bold and masculine—her lips are somewhat coarse. Her stature is short—decidedly short; and her figure is common and vulgar. You will pardon me for being thus explicit, George: but as you have insisted on hearing a description of my first impressions, I am

* The Earl of Malmesbury was sent specially to Brunswick to demand the hand of the Princess Caroline on behalf of the Prince of Wales. He likewise escorted the Princess to England; and his very curious "Diaries and Correspondence" have recently been published, in four volumes, by Mr. Bentley of New Burlington Street. He was no true friend to the Princess, and was a heartless, selfish, dissipated, self-sufficient, and impertinent aristocrat. The following memorandum appears in his Diary (Vol. III, page 201):—"Princess Caroline has a tooth drawn; she sends it down to me by her page—nasty and indelicate!"

bound to give them with frankness—although in sorrow," added Lady Jersey, with every appearance of sincerity in tone, look, and manner.

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the Prince, hurriedly: "I wish you to speak frankly—I thank you for this candour. It is a proof of your love—your friendship," he continued, vainly struggling against the agitation of his feelings;—"and it is the more kind and considerate on your part, Frances, because I am now prepared for the worst—the very worst—and the crowning shock, when we meet face to face, will be the less terrible! Go on, then—go on."

"The bust of the Princess," continued the patrician *intriguante*, "is full and large: but there does not appear to be that plumpness—that firmness—which you adore so much;"—and, as she thus spoke with an affected bashfulness and in a simpering tone, she looked down at her own exuberant charms which rose so grandly from the corsage that left them half revealed.

"How cruelly I have been deceived by every one except by *you!*" cried the Prince, in a tone of exceeding bitterness. "My brother—the Princess's portrait—my own private emissary at Brunswick the—newspapers—all have represented Caroline as a beauty——"

"And do you think, dear George, that I would mislead you for a single moment?" interrupted Lady Jersey, in her softest and most insinuating tones. "Such a proceeding on my part were ridiculous: because within the next hour or two you will have met your future wife, and have had an opportunity to judge for yourself."

"Yes—yes—I believe you, my sweet friend—I believe you," murmured the Prince, not knowing how to restrain the bitter vexation which the designing woman had thus succeeded in exciting within him. "But pray resume your description—and let me be fully prepared for all that I may have to encounter."

"There is assuredly nothing elegant nor yet graceful in the figure of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey: and here we may perhaps as well observe that the Princess Caroline was spoken of as her *Royal*, instead of *Serene* Highness (trumpery distinction!) from the instant that she landed in England, and before her marriage with the heir-apparent took place. "As for the bearing of her Royal Highness being majestic," continued Lady Jersey, "such a statement could only be looked upon as one of those fulsome compliments which are invariably paid to royal or illustrious personages. For no individual would be so *disloyal* and no newspaper so *bold* as to proclaim the real truth," added her ladyship. "It is the grovelling, servile, and spaniel-like character of Englishmen to puff off everything royal, simply because it *is* royal. In their eyes Royalty cannot be ugly, wicked, inelegant, or disgusting. But were the same truth to be told of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick as would be spoken were she a cook or a dairy-maid, her personal appearance would be summed up in these terms:—Pretty face, but bold and impudent expression—reddish hair—large and lascivious-looking eyes—big Roman nose—coarse lips—pig's eye-brows—decaying teeth—consequently bad braeth—short thick neck—large bust, but the fulness of which seems more matron-like than virginal—projecting shoulder-blades—short stature—common-looking and vulgar figure—mien anything but imposing—gait decidedly awkward."

"And such is the future Princess of Wales—aye, and the future Queen of England!" said the heir-apparent, in a slow, measured, and solemn tone, as if he were taking in at one deliberative glance all the defects that had just been enumerated and which were so well calculated to shock and disgust even a mind far less sensitive than his own. "But, by the living God!" he exclaimed, suddenly becoming passionately excited,—"she shall *never* be Queen of England! No—they may compel me to accompany her to the altar and thereby make her *Princess of Wales*—but I swear, by heaven and by hell! that she shall never be *Queen of England!*"

As he gave utterance to these mingled imprecations and asseverations, his Royal Highness again started to his feet and began to pace the room with rapid and uneven steps; while, the moment his back was turned towards her, an expression of fiend-like triumph swept over the lovely countenance of Lady Jersey.

"Have you anything more to tell me, my dear friend?" abruptly demanded the Prince, as he stopped short at the expiration of a minute, and, abandoning his agitated walk, returned to the sofa.

"I have explained my impressions relative to the personal appearance of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey, affecting an extreme reluctance to continue the topic: "what more can I tell you?"

"Her manners—her mind—her accomplishments," exclaimed the Prince, hurriedly: "have you nothing to say on all those points? Did you yourself receive no impressions relative thereto?—did Mrs. Harcourt vouchsafe no confidential communications?—was Malmesbury himself utterly silent? Come—I see by your looks that you are not altogether ignorant on those heads——"

"But if I have nothing cheering—nothing favourable to impart?" interrupted her ladyship, still affecting reluctance.

"At all events it will be the *truth*," was the immediate response of the Prince, who was thus drinking in with unconscious avidity all the poisoned draughts of misrepresentation and exaggeration which the artful woman poured into his soul.

"You force me into revelations and avowals which give me exquisite pain because I see that they hurt you," said her ladyship. "But since you are so obstinate, I am bound to obey. You must know, then, that while the Princess retired for a short time after luncheon, I had an opportunity of conversing with Mrs. Harcourt. It was then that she told me the anecdote concerning the extracted tooth at Osnabruck. She is a woman of keen perception—retentive memory—and gossiping disposition: she talks rapidly, and imparts a vast amount of information in an incredibly short space of time. Accordingly, I learnt that the Princess Caroline is so ignorant, she cannot write a decent hand, much less spell accurately."

"Good heavens! is this indeed possible?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, now more indignant than vexed. "Why, it is a positive insult to me—to the Royal Family—to the British nation, to have sent over such a creature to be my wife. But go on—go on: nothing will surprise me now!"

"Mrs. Harcourt informs me," resumed Lady Jersey, "that the Princess is volatile, frivolous,

and often impertinent. That she is ill-mannered, familiar, and at times utterly oblivious of her rank and station, I myself could perceive during the few hours that I have this day passed in the company of her Royal Highness. She talks indiscreetly—gives utterance to anything that comes uppermost in her mind—and frequently rattles away with a marvellous affectation of wit and humour. On such occasions, Mrs. Harcourt assures me, she will giggle in the most childish manner; aud, what is worse, she of course expects that every one will smile at her bad jokes and obscure jocularities. Nor is she very particular as to the language she makes use of; and she certainly said two or three things in my presence this morning which savoured of downright indelicacy. Her Royal Highness was brought up, it is generally understood, with much severity: indeed, her own father the Duke said to Lord Malmesbury a few weeks ago at Brunswick, '*She is not a fool; but she has no discretion: she has been closely looked after—and I can assure your lordship it was necessary.*' What this could possibly mean," continued Lady Jersey, "I must leave you, my dear George, to conjecture: but very certain it is that the ideas and language of your future wife are somewhat loose, despite of the severity of her rearing."

"This is a picture well calculated to gladden me," observed the heir-apparent bitterly. "Complete it, my dear Frances—complete it, I pray you."

"Lord Malmesbury communicated to Mrs. Harcourt the opinion which the Duke of Brunswick had expressed concerning his daughter," continued the Countess of Jersey; "and dear gossiping Mrs. Harcourt has not hesitated to reveal everything to me. But would you believe it, my dear George, that the Princess is positively of dirty habits——"

"What!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, now contemplating his artful companion with dismay.

"It is as I tell you," persisted Lady Jersey, every instant growing bolder and less scrupulous in her allegations against the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick. "Lord Malmesbury was positively compelled to remonstrate with her Royal Highness upon the slovenliness of her habits, the filth of her apparel, and the disgusting neglect of her person, which was but too evident.* He plainly

* The following extracts are from Malmesbury's work mentioned in a preceding note:—"Mademoiselle Hertzfeldt, the Duke of Brunswick's mistress, takes me aside and says nearly these words: 'I conjure you to induce the Prince of Wales to make his bride live a retired life at the commencement. She has always been kept within bounds and had a tight hand held over her; *and this was absolutely necessary.* If she finds herself altogether in the world without any restrictions she will not keep her footing sure. She has not a depraved heart—she has never done anything wrong—but her speech is always ahead of her reflection: she abandons herself heart and soul to those with whom she is conversing; and thence it follows, even in this little Court, that meanings and intentions are attributed to her which never could have been really her own. It is absolutely necessary that the Prince keeps a tight hand over her; *or she will go astray.*'" (Page 169, Vol. III.) "She has no stability; no fixed character, a light and flighty mind, but meaning well and well disposed; and my eternal theme to her is *to think before she speaks, and recollect herself.*" (Page 179.) "I regret the apparent facility of the Princess Caroline's character; her want of reflection and substance: with a *steady* man she would do vastly well, but with one of a different description *there are great risks.*" (Page 182.) "The Princess talked of her aunt the Abbess; said she had endeavoured to inspire her with a diffidence and mistrust of me—that I was a dangerous man. I tried to get rid of this sort of conversation; but the Princess stuck by it; and I was forced to say that I believed her aunt had forgotten that twenty years had elapsed since she had seen me, or heard of me; and that, besides, such an insinuation was a tacit accusation of my being very *foolishly* unprincipled. She said she meant well; that she perhaps thought too partially of me herself, and was afraid for her. It was in vain to attempt to turn the subject: she went on during the whole supper—was in high spirits, *and laughed unmercifully at her aunt and her supposed partiality for me.*" (Pages 183 and 184.) "The Duke of Brunswick takes me aside, and says that the only reason why he wished Mademoiselle Rozenweit to be with the Princess was that his daughter *writes very ill* and *spells ill*, and he was desirous this should not appear." (Page 187.) "Mademoiselle Hertzfeldt again talks to me as before about the Princess Caroline. She must be governed by fear, *even by terror.* 'She will kick over the traces if you don't take care.'" (Page 189.) "Princess Caroline shows me an anonymous letter received from London about Lady Jersey: its object was to frighten the Princess with the idea that she would lead her into an affair of gallantry and be ready to be convenient on such an occasion. This did *not* frighten the Princess, although it did the Duke and Duchess; and on my perceiving this, I told her Lady Jersey would be more cautious than to risk such an audacious measure; and that moreover it was *death* to presume to approach a Princess of Wales, and no man would be daring enough to think of it. *She asked me whether I was in earnest.* I said such was our law; that any body who presumed to *love* her was guilty of *high treason* and punished with *death*, if she was weak enough to listen to him: so also would *she.* This startled her." (Page 189.) "Roads in good order. Princess wanted me to be in the same coach with her; I resisted it as being impossible, from its being improper. She disposed to laugh at the matter: I discountenance it." (Page 190.) "Her character could not distinguish between *giving* as a benevolence and flinging away the money like a child. She thought that the act of getting rid of the money, and not seeming to care about it, constituted the merit." (Page 192.) "Princess Caroline very awkward at cards; speaks without thinking; gets too easy; calls the ladies she never saw before, '*My love, my dear, my little one.*' I notice this and reprove it strongly. The Princess for the first time disposed to take it amiss." (Page 193.) "On summing up Princess Caroline's character to-day, it came out to my mind to be that she has quick parts, without a sound or distinguishing understanding; that she has a ready conception, but no judgment; caught by the first impression; led by the first impulse; turned away by appearances or by pleasure; loving to talk, and prone to confide and make missish friendships that last twenty-four hours. *Some natural but no acquired morality:* and no strong innate ideas of its value and necessity: warm feelings and nothing to counterbalance them; great good humour and much good-nature—no appearance of caprice—rather quick and vivacious, but not a grain of rancour. From her habits, from the life she was allowed and even compelled to live, forced to dissemble; fond of gossiping; and this strengthened greatly by the example of her good mother, who is all curiosity and inquisitiveness." (Page 196.) "At supper Princess Caroline very cheerful, and pleasantly so; understands a joke and can make one." (Page 197.) "Princess Caroline affects to dislike Madame Walmoden and calls her a bore. I say she ought to ask her to play with her: she does it, but reluctantly, and during the party whispers and giggles with some of the young women. I notice this to her after, as what I could not approve." (Page 198.) "Princess Caroline very *missish* at supper to-

and openly told her that she was positively offensive on that account, and that she could not fail to disgust her future husband. Mrs Harcourt has indeed seen portions of Lord Malmesbury's *Diary* in which all these various conversations are duly recorded—doubtless to be one day published to the world."

"Oh! Frances, Frances, I am distressed beyond all power of description!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, literally writhing with the mental anguish which these shocking disclosures had naturally excited. "What am I to do?—what course can I adopt? If I refuse to receive the Princess as my wife, the Ministers will refuse to pay my debts—and these at this moment amount to six hundred thousand pounds! O my God! I already loath—detest—abominate the German wretch that has been chosen as my bride."

And covering his face with his hands, the Prince yielded to no affected nor even moderate grief. It was the first time in his life—or at least for many a year—that he had thus given way to such affliction; and its sting was fraught with an indescribable bitterness.

And now the Countess of Jersey, having worked her royal lover up to this unspeakable pitch of wretchedness, and being perfectly satisfied in her own mind that she had thoroughly disgusted him with the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick,—no matter how different the Princess might really prove from the hideous picture thus delineated,—the Countess of Jersey, we say, began to console the heir-apparent to the best of her ability.

"Well, I must not be downcast," exclaimed the Prince at length. "My father and the Ministers may compel me to marry this German creature—but they cannot force me to love her: they may drive me to the altar to accept her hand in marriage—but they cannot constrain me to give her my heart in return. No—nor in compelling me to take a wife, can they force me to surrender up any one of my mistresses!"

"Nothing, nothing should induce *me* to forget or abandon you, my own beloved Prince," exclaimed the Countess of Jersey, flinging her arms about the neck of his Royal Highness and covering his countenance with kisses: then, throwing herself back upon the sofa, and making him recline in her arms in such a manner that his head lay pillowed upon her bosom, she said, "Repose thus with me for a few minutes, my George: it cannot be long ere the summons will arrive for you to repair to St. James's Palace to greet your bride."

"Would that the hateful ceremony were over!" exclaimed the Prince. "But, thank heaven, when once the knot is tied, you will then become a resident beneath this roof, my dearest Frances—in your capacity of Lady of the Bedchamber to her Royal Highness——"

"And supposing that the Princess should be jealous?" said the Countess, with a smile that revealed her pearly teeth.

"You will be protected by *me* against *her* anger," was the prompt reply of the royal lover. "But you have given me no details of the landing of the Princess—of the reception which you experienced at her hands——"

"Ah! I had forgotten," interrupted the Countess. "But it may all be summed up in a few words. Obedient to your instructions, Lord Claremont, Mrs. Harvey Aston, and myself proceeded to Greenwich to meet the Princess. She was overwhelmingly polite to me—I know not wherefore—but such was the fact. Lord Malmesbury, methought, treated me with a proportionate degree of coldness. For this, however, I cared little. I sate next to the Princess at the luncheon given by the Governor of the Hospital; and her Royal Highness chattered a great deal to me and Mrs. Aston. Afterwards the Princess withdrew to an apartment prepared for her, and where she chose to be alone for a short time; and in the interval I gleaned from Mrs. Harcourt the various pieces of information which I have already given you. Mrs. Aston, Mrs. Harcourt, and I were then summoned to attend upon her Royal Highness. The carriages were then ordered: Mrs. Harcourt and I accompanied the Princess—Mrs. Aston rode in the same vehicle with Lords Malmesbury and Claremont. There were very few persons assembled to witness the landing and the subsequent departure: nor did the carriages attract much observation along the road. In an hour from the moment that we left Greenwich Hospital, we alighted at St. James's Palace;—and leaving the Princess to receive such a welcome as the King, Queen, Princes, and Princesses, may think fit to give her, I pleaded indisposition and hurried away. But instead of proceeding homeward to lie down for a few hours," added the Countess, laughing, "I came hither to hold this long discourse with you."

The Prince was about to make some observation in reply, when the door was opened slowly; and Germain, who had purposely fidgetted a moment

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night. I much fear these habits are irrecoverably rooted in her; she is naturally curious, and a gossip; she is quick and observing, and she has a silly pride in finding out everything: she thinks herself particularly acute in discovering *likings*, and this leads her at times to *the most improper remarks and conversation!*" (Page 200.) "Argument with the Princess about her toilette. She piques herself on dressing quick: I disapprove this. She maintains her point; I however desire Madame Busche to explain to her that the Prince is very delicate, and that he expects a long and very careful toilette, of which she has no idea. On the contrary, she neglects it sadly, *and is offensive from this neglect.* Madame Busche executes her commission well, and the Princess comes out the next day well washed *all over.*" (Pages 207 and 208.) "Princess out of humour. Very nonsensical confidence about Prince of Orange—cannot be committed to writing—must recollect it, as well as my answer and advice." (Page 208.) "After dinner long and serious conversation with the Princess, on her manner of calling women by their plain name—of saying '*My dear, my love,*' &c." (Page 209.) "I also took frequent opportunities of speaking very *seriously* to the Princess Caroline, on her not showing due respect to the Duchess her mother, of her sneering and slighting her." (Page 210.) "I had two conversations with the Princess Caroline. One on *the toilette*, on *cleanliness*, and on *delicacy of speaking*. On these points I endeavoured, as far as was possible for a *man*, to inculcate the necessity of great and nice attention to every part of dress, as well as to what was hid, as to what was seen. *I knew she wore coarse petticoats, coarse shifts, and thread stockings, and that these never were well washed, or changed often enough!* I observed that a long toilette was necessary, and gave her no credit for boasting that her's was a *short* one. What I could not say myself upon this point, I got said through women; through Madame Busche, and afterwards through Mrs. Harcourt. It is remarkable how amazingly on this point her education has been neglected." (Pages 211 and 212.)

or two with the handle, in order to give due warning of his approach, entered the room. The heir-apparent had therefore ample leisure to raise his head from the voluptuous pillow on which it had been reposing — while the Countess had also a moment's graee to arrange her hair which the Princess's caresses had somewhat disturbed.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Germain, with a low bow, "their Majesties await your presence at St. James's Palace."

"A few minutes' attention to my toilette, and I obey the summons, Germain," exclaimed the Prince.

The Countess of Jersey then took her departure; and his Royal Highness hurried to his own chamber, where he speedily made such changes in his apparel as he thought fit.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of this memorable day that the Prince of Wales entered his state-carriage and drove to St. James's Palace close by, to meet for the first time the fated and fore-doomed Caroline of Brunswick!

CHAPTER CLXXV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

RETURN we now to that chamber in Whitechapel Workhouse where, at the close of a recent chapter, we left the parish-surgeon alone with his patient, James Melmoth.

The morning, which had broken amidst such unseasonable gloom, was now brightening up, as we have already described the gladdening change at the moment when the Amazon was looking forth from the sponging-house window in Chancery Lane: but the sunbeams which now penetrated into the pauper infirmary in Whitechapel, only seemed to mock and not to cheer the wretched aspect of the place.

Grim and wan in its sickliness was the expression of Melmoth's countenance, as those beams played thereon through the windows which were curtained with naught save the dinginess of their own dirt;—and yet the unhappy man smiled faintly —for the thought struck him at the moment how delightful it would be to roam in the open fields, and breathe the pure air of heaven instead of the fetid atmosphere of those foul infirmary-rooms, and listen to the singing of birds instead of the complaints of neglected paupers and the growling of surly nurses.

"You feel better, my good man?" said the surgeon, as he observed that sickly smile into which the invalid's features had for a moment relaxed.

"Yes—somewhat better, sir," replied Melmoth. "I am glad that I have found my children—although we met under circumstances so dreadful—so very, very dreadful!"

"What do you mean by dreadful circumstances?" asked the surgeon, seating himself on the edge of the bed and contemplating the invalid with a profound attention. "I can understand that the meeting was painful—but to be dreadful——"

"Oh! do not question me, sir—do not question me!" exclaimed Melmoth, a frenzied expression suddenly sweeping over his countenance. "You will only wrest from me the most horrible of secrets—for they are already trembling at the tip of my tongne. Had you treated me harshly, I should have felt no inclination to tell you anything: but you have looked—you have spoken—you have acted kindly towards me, and I am inspired with an ardent longing to unbosom to your ears all the tremendous mysteries which are now entombed in my soul as a corpse in its sepulchre! But do not question me, I say—do not question me," cried the invalid, his whole form quivering with a dreadful spasm. "Although my inclination prompts me in one sense to make a confidant of you—yet in another, do I shrink with indescribable horror from the bare idea! And to tell you the truth," added the man, his voice now sinking to a low hollow whisper, which sounded like the wintry breeze through a leafless tree,—"there are times when I fancy that I have *two minds*—two minds, separate and distinct—one urging me in *this* direction, and the other in *that*."

And as Melmoth made the strange revelation in a tone of mysterious confidence, he gazed up into the surgeon's countenance with a look wherein the wildness of insanity and the mournfulness of a sad condition of self-knowledge were ominously blended.

We have already stated that the medical man was devoted to his profession and that he worshipped the art with as much enthusiasm as the most ardent lover could possibly experience towards his mistress. Such a peculiar case as that which he had evidently now before him, was not therefore likely to be neglected or over-looked by such an earnest inquirer into the depths and mysteries of the medical world: indeed the surgeon had previously observed particular symptoms leading him to suspect that this was one of those examples of psychological eccentricity into which it was highly important to examine.

"My good friend," he accordingly said, in a soothing tone and with encouraging manner, "I am incapable of abusing any amount of confidence which you may feel disposed to place in me. A medical practitioner must observe good faith in that respect as implicitly as if he were a father-confessor. You tell me that you experience the effects of two separate inclinations, urging you in different directions——"

"Yes—it is so," ejaculated Melmoth, abruptly. "At this very moment, I am the prey to a species of excruciating anxiety, prompting me to unbosom myself entirely to you—while on the other hand I feel that I would sooner perish the most wretched of deaths than betray the appalling secrets which I cherish *here—here!*"

And the invalid beat his breast violently as he uttered these last words.

"Will you not look upon me as a friend?" inquired the surgeon softly.

"Yes—yes—I must!" murmured James Melmoth, with accents of feverish impatience: then, suddenly clutching the arm of the medical man and gazing up with a kind of wild earnestness into his countenance, he said in a deep sepulchral tone, "Strange things occurred to me last night! But stoop down your head—lower—lower still! They must not overhear me in the next room. There! keep your head bent like that, and I can whisper in your ear!"

The surgeon glanced with a momentary feeling of affright at the face of the invalid as he stooped

THE PRINCESS CAROLINE OF BRUNSWICK.

his head in the manner desired: for Melmoth's countenance had suddenly become pale and livid—frenzy was now expressed in his glaring eye-balls—and his whole appearance was that of a maniac about to burst forth into all the terrific violence of a rabid fury. But stifling that sentiment of alarm with which so awful a spectacle for an instant inspired him, the medical man placed himself in the position most convenient to catch anything that the invalid might murmuringly breathe in his ear.

"The darkness was thick and tangible last night," Melmoth resumed with startling abruptness, "as I rose from my pallet and looked forth from the window. Yes—I looked forth, despite of that pitchy blackness which filled the air; and my eyes could penetrate the dense atmosphere of night as if my glances were lightnings piercing through it. And it seemed as if there were a feeble glimmering that began to appear amidst that gloom a long way off: and this glimmering gradually grew brighter and brighter, until a churchyard, bathed in moonlight, stood out from amidst the utter darkness that still enveloped all besides. It was the scene of cold silvery lustre viewed on the opposite bank of a river of ink—a strange picture beheld through the medium of an atmosphere black as pitch! But, Ah! what did I see in that churchyard?" demanded Melmoth, a strange spasm for a moment convulsing his features, as his fingers tightened with spasmodic violence in their grasp upon the surgeon's arm. "'Twas myself—my own self—lying asleep by the side of a grave—aye, and near a coffin which had been dragged up from that grave—yes, and nigh also to the loathsome corpse torn forth from that coffin! And then methought my mind was transfused from *myself* into that *image of myself* which lay sleeping in the moon-lit churchyard: in other words, it seemed as if I lost my own identity as I stood at the window of this

workhouse room, and became changed into the being that was pillowed upon the wormy soil up-cast from the yawning grave close by. And I began to *think* with the mind of that sleeping counterpart of myself—and I began to *see* also with his eyes. For presently the deep, deep silence of the churchyard was broken by the low rustling of the garments of the grave; and hideous shapes began to glide through the moon-lit air. Oh! it was horrible—horrible!—for the cemetery was giving up its dead to render the night appalling—and the spectres of the departed were mingling *then* in death as never had they mingled in life! The pampered son of luxury and the occupant of the pauper's grave were close together there: the wealthy tradesman's wife, who had died of a surfeit, and the lank form of the needlewoman, done to death by famine and cold in one of the long, long nights of winter, were next to each other now! And there were the ghastly shapes of men and women who had been hanged, with the halters round their necks, and following the spectre of the hangman as he bore the accursed gibbet at the head of this awful group. Oh! it was horrible—horrible—and I saw it all! I heard the rustling of the winding-sheets as the ghastly multitude mustered in death's array and proceeded through the churchyard — over the graves and amidst the tombs, glidingly — glidingly! Yes — and I beheld their eyes gaze on me with stony glare as they passed by the spot where I lay entranced—or rather where lay that mysterious and supernatural image of myself. I could distinguish those who had been interred a long time and had almost changed into the earth to which they were consigned, from those who had only been buried recently. For the former were loathsome with corruption and rottenness—while the latter had all the marble appearance of fresh corpses. With the former there were eyeless sockets—noses fallen in—lips drawn away from the teeth, which were thus left grinning horribly—the flesh rotting and discoloured — the shroud in rags! With the latter there were the regular outlines of feature—the dull, fixed, stony gaze—the passionless tranquillity of countenance—the lips colourless as the cheeks, but covering the teeth—the under-jaw held up by the white bandage—and the clean dry winding-sheet! Yes—I saw all this—I marked all this—my memory received an impress of all those details, as indelibly as if seared upon the brain by a red-hot iron! And then methought that I sprang suddenly from the spot where I had been lying in a profound sleep—that I seized upon one of those spectral shapes floating past me—that I felt its shroud rustling in the grasp of my right hand, and its flesh cold as ice to the touch of my left—that it slowly turned its marble countenance and bent its stony gaze upon me—that I felt its breath, cold, cold as wintry air upon my cheek—and that I recognised its features——O God! the features of my own wife!"

And Melmoth, who in the unnatural evanescent strength derived from a feverish excitement terribly wrought up, had raised himself somewhat upon the pillow, now fell back with a hollow moan; — and, closing his eyes, he lay like one dead!

The surgeon was alarmed — no, not alarmed exactly; for he was too much accustomed to see strangers and paupers die, to be *able* to care much about the loss of any one individual more than another: but he felt vexed at the idea that the present poor wretch might pass away before he (the said medical man) should have succeeded in worming from him the clue to that morbid condition of mind whereof he had given such astounding proofs by the narrative of a dream which he had looked upon as a fact.

But on feeling Melmoth's pulse and placing a hand upon his heart, the surgeon discovered that life was not extinct; and he hastened to apply the usual restoratives. In a few minutes the patient recovered his senses, but was too much exhausted to speak: the surgeon accordingly administered some medicine the effect of which was shortly to lull him into a gentle repose—and the medical man then quitted the infirmary, with an intimation to the nurse that he should return in the afternoon.

Now it happened that this surgeon was intimately acquainted with Mr. Thurston, in whose medical knowledge and psychological information he placed the utmost confidence. He accordingly repaired direct to the West End of the town—called in May Fair—and communicated to Mr. Thurston the fact that there was at the present moment a very extraordinary case of mental hallucination in Whitechapel poor-house. He entered into details; and the curiosity of Mr. Thurston was so excited, that he readily consented to accompany his friend to the eastern district of the metropolis and see the "curious patient." Luncheon was however served up first—and moreover Mr. Thurston had a few visits to pay in the neighbourhood;—and then there were some recently acquired objects of interest to show in the surgery,—such as a wen, as large as a Dutch cheese, taken off a man's head and preserved in a jar—an eye that was removed from its socket, the patient having received a blow thereon which had produced cancer—and the body of an infant which had been overlain in the parish work-house. The luncheon being disposed of—the visits paid—and the curiosities duly inspected—Mr. Thurston's one-horse chaise was ordered round to the door; and it was about half-past three in the afternoon when the two medical gentlemen alighted at the gate of Whitechapel workhouse.

The surgeon of the establishment led the way direct to the infirmary, followed by Mr. Thurston; and as they passed through the larger room of which mention has already been made, the former gentleman pointed to a group of three children, whispering at the same time to his friend, "Those two boys and that girl belong to the patient we are about to visit."

"Ah! poor devils," said Mr. Thurston, carelessly: "they look thin and pale enough."

"You should have seen them this morning—before they put on the clothes they are wearing now," observed the parish doctor, still speaking in a low tone;—"they were positively horrible to gaze upon! But these things can't be helped, I suppose," he added, as he turned and led the way into the wretched crib where Melmoth was lying.

"There! do you see that gentleman along with the doctor of this place?" suddenly whispered the eldest of the three children, as he caught each of the other two with nervous violence by the arm. "Look—I mean that gentleman who is just following the doctor into father's room. Ah! he is the wicked, unkind, heartless man who took away poor baby's body and

would not let it be buried," added young Melmoth, speaking in the lowest possible tone to his little brother and sister, while the tears ran down his emaciated countenance.

The boy and girl to whom he made that communication, wept likewise, although they were too young to understand it altogether; and thus the poor children mingled their tears and their sobs with as much feeeling as could possibly be experienced by the offspring of a Duke and Duchess.

Meantime the workhouse doctor and Mr. Thurston had entered the room where Melmoth was lying.

The invalid had slept for a few hours since the surgeon was with him in the morning; and he had awakened considerably refreshed. This assurance he now gave, when asked in the usual manner how he felt.

"And your mind, my good fellow—your mind?" said the workhouse surgeon, stooping down and whispering in Melmoth's ear. "You need not be afraid to speak in the presence of that gentleman who has accompanied me: he is an intimate friend—a brother professional——"

"Come to see us pauper patients out of curiosity, I suppose?" interrupted Melmoth, somewhat sternly. "Is it not so?"

"The interest which a medical practitioner takes in cases properly belonging to the sphere of his own profession, cannot be looked upon as a mere idle curiosity," said the surgeon.

"Well, sir—I think you are right there," observed Melmoth, after a few moments' reflection. "But you have not mentioned to him anything of those wild vagaries which I poured into your ears this morning, I hope?" added the invalid, in a whisper so low and timid that it was scarcely audible.

"Do you think I would betray your confidence?" asked the surgeon, with the well-assumed air of sincerity unjustly suspected. "But my friend will consider it strange that I should continue thus to talk to you in whispers. This poor man," he exclaimed aloud, turning at the same time towards Thurston, "is a patient in whom I take great interest."

"Indeed!" observed the May Fair practitioner. "Is there anything peculiar in his case?" he inquired, with the tone and manner of one who had received no previous information on the subject.

"Badly wounded—in numerous places—wonderful how he escaped with his life," responded the workhouse surgeon.

"How were the wounds caused?" asked Thurston.

"The poor man was passing through a field where some cockneys were shooting," replied the surgeon; "and he received in his own body the contents of the fowling-pieces of those awkward sportsmen."

"Small shot, I suppose?" said Thurston, inquiringly.

"Egad! they were such shot as you would not like to penetrate *your* skin, my dear friend," exclaimed the workhouse surgeon: "nor would you style them small, I think. In fact, two slugs had lodged in the calf of the right leg of the poor fellow—and a crooked nail was sticking in the left——"

"But surely sportsmen do not use such materials?" cried Thurston.

"I know nothing about it," responded the workhouse surgeon. "I never was out shooting in my life—and never wish to go. Duck-shot and swan-shot are like cabalistic characters to me;—and I should not even have known that the things which I extracted were called slugs, had not a pauper-invalid in the next room told me so. But here they are."

And the medical gentleman produced them from his pocket.

"I beg your pardon," gasped Melmoth, on whom a violent agitation had been rapidly stealing during the colloquy just recorded;—"but really, gentlemen—this discourse of yours——"

"Calm yourself, my good friend," said the workhouse surgeon: "we did not mean to distress you. Indeed, we could not possibly conceive that our remarks were calculated to annoy you."

"This is extraordinary — most extraordinary!" murmured Mr. Thurston, as he inspected the slugs which his friend had put into his hand.

"Extraordinary indeed!" echoed the latter, but now likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "And you will agree with me that the whole case is more extraordinary still, when I assure you that the poor wretch has received not less than thirty wounds—and yet he escaped with his life!"

"Extraordinary!" repeated Thurston: "yes—marvellous—miraculous! But, gracious God!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud, unable to control the feelings with which he was all in a moment inspired by the idea that now struck him.

"What—what do you mean?" gasped forth Melmoth, raising himself up to a sitting posture with the sudden strength of a poignant convulsion.

The two medical men simultaneously flung their looks upon him; and they actually recoiled from the ghastly horror which was depicted upon his countenance.

"Heavens! what ails you?" cried the workhouse surgeon; for having neither caught nor understood the suspicion which had just flashed to the mind of Thurston, he could conceive no other reason for Melmoth's sudden excitement and dreadful aspect than that the unfortunate man was passing rapidly into a wild phase of insanity.

"What ails him?" repeated Thurston, shuddering all over: "do you ask what ails him? Thirty wounds in different parts of his body—missiles of different descriptions extracted from his flesh—— Ah! the reading of the mystery is no longer difficult—and we have before us the monster in human shape——"

"O God! have mercy upon me!" groaned Melmoth, sinking back upon his bolster.

"For heaven's sake explain yourself!" cried the workhouse surgeon, clutching Thurston violently by the arm. "You have raised my curiosity to an intolerable pitch——"

"Is it possible that you never read the newspapers?" interrupted the May Fair practitioner, his countenance expressing a horror almost as intense as that of the wretched man who lay gasping convulsively in the miserable pallet. "Know you not," continued Thurston, drawing his friend forcibly aside, "that for some time past a fiend in human shape has been rifling the last homes of the dead——"

"Holy God! yes—I remember *now* that I have both heard and read of those atrocities," interrupted the workhouse surgeon, a deadly pallor overspreading his features: "but I looked upon them as immense exaggerations—if not as downright inventions——"

"No—no: they were solemn truths!" murmured Thurston, whose usually cold and imperturbable manner had become changed into the shuddering agitation of a horrible excitement. "And the journals the other morning reported how a cemetery was violated in the dead of night—how the spring-gun placed in that churchyard exploded—how the monster must have been dangerously wounded——"

"Ah! my God!—then this unhappy being is the wretched monomaniac who has perpetrated those horrors!" exclaimed the workhouse surgeon, pointing in mingled disgust and pity towards the couch.

"'Tis true!—'tis true!" cried Melmoth, whose ears had caught the words last uttered: then covering his face with his hands, he exclaimed in a rending tone, "Kill me—kill me, I beseech you: but do not—oh! do not betray my horrible secret to the world! For the sake of my poor children, do not—I beg and implore you!"

"What in heaven's name shall we do with him, Thurston?" demanded the workhouse surgeon, in a low tone which was rendered tremulous with dread horror.

"Thurston!—who said Thurston?" suddenly yelled forth the invalid, springing up in his couch as if it were a corpse that was galvanised—so hideous was his aspect, and so fearful were the workings of his ghastly countenance. "Who mentioned the name of Thurston?" he demanded again and in a tone of the wildest excitement, his eyes glaring like those of a famished wolf.

"My name is Thurston," said the May Fair practitioner, the horror and loathing which he experienced towards the monster-man being somewhat absorbed for the instant by the curiosity which this sudden turn in the proceedings had excited.

"Then give me up the body of my babe!" yelled forth the now almost rabid Melmoth: and, in the furious endeavour which he made to spring from the bed in order to attack the surgeon, he fell precipitately on the hard floor.

The violence of the concussion deprived him of his senses: but when he awoke to consciousness again, he was in utter darkness. For a few minutes he lay perfectly still, collecting his thoughts as well as he was able: and slowly, slowly—like the waves of a long swell flowing in one after the other when the hurricane has passed over the surface of the ocean—did the tide of memory roll in upon the brain of the monster-man. And soon the rush of recollections became more rapid, more painful, and more intolerably poignant,—until the surges of memory boiled high and furious; and his whole being appeared to be tossed upon the wild tempest of his whirling, scaring, dreadful, goading thoughts.

At length, in obedience to an impulse which prompted him to ascertain where he was, he endeavoured to stretch forth his arms to *feel* through the utter darkness in which he was entombed: but no—he was powerless—motionless!

He felt that he lay like a statue, unable to move a limb. Nevertheless, his sensations told him that he was in a *bed*—and not in a *coffin*, as he had for an instant dreaded. But was he under the influence of a hideous nightmare which held him bound hand and foot? No: for he could just raise his head an inch or two from the bolster by the spontaneous motion of the neck; and he was assuredly *awake*—for he could now think of all kinds of subjects—he could direct his ideas into whatever channel he chose—and therefore was it beyond all doubt that he was *not* asleep.

But was he, then, in a trance? No: for he could impart a slight motion at will to his entire frame. His limbs were not held powerless by paralysis: they seemed as if held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress and the sleeves of the jacket sown to the sides of that garment itself.

Ah! a light suddenly flashed in unto his brain: he was a lunatic—or at all events treated as one;—and the accursed strait-waistcoat was upon him!

CHAPTER CLXXVI.

THE GERMAN PRINCESS.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of that memorable day—and in a splendidly furnished apartment at Saint James's Palace, sate the Princess Caroline of Brunswick. At a short distance stood an elderly gentleman, with a patrician air and in a full Court costume, and whose eyes were fixed with an appearance of profound respect upon her Royal Highness as she addressed her observations to him. No other persons were present at the time in that saloon—no ladies-in-waiting, no courtiers, no pages; the Princess and her elderly companion were alone together—for the arrival of the Prince of Wales was now expected every moment.

Let us pause for a few minutes to give the reader the true portraiture of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick;—and the result will show that if she were not quite so fascinating as the private emissary of the heir-apparent had depicted in his correspondence from Germany, she was at all events very far from being the disgusting creature which the vile, profligate, and unprincipled Countess of Jersey had chosen to represent.

The Princess was twenty-five years of age, and rather pretty than handsome. Her countenance expressed a girlish affability and artlessness mingled with the sweetest good-humour; and it was evident, by the reading of every lineament of her face, that had she been born a peasant instead of a princess, she would have been the happiest, most joyous, unaffected, and loveable being that ever tripped over meadow or gathered early violets. It was impossible to gaze upon her for a minute without feeling a sorrowful conviction that the hoyden gladness and innocent gaiety of the natural mind had been warped, circumscribed, and modelled as it were by the artificial ceremonies and formal observances of a Court.

Her hair was of a light auburn, luxuriant, and glossy; and when worn in simple bands or in ringlets, without decoration, it was of itself as becoming an adornment as the most proudly-born could possibly display or as the fairest of the sex could own. The eyes of the Princess were not too large, nor were they bold in expression: they were handsome eyes—of a fine blue—and reflecting all the goodness of temper and generosity of heart which, being the natural characteristics of the Princess, had survived the contamination of those cold, hollow, and insincere manners and habits that sur-

rounded her at her father's Court. At times the expression of those eyes could become melting and tender,—but with a soft and delicate voluptuousness, and not with a coarse and meretricious licentiousness. Her eye-brows were not broadly defined: but they were sufficiently marked to prevent the general portraiture from being spoilt by any positive deficiency on that score.

Her lips were somewhat full—of a lively red—and with a dewy moisture constantly upon them. There was something luscious in their appearance; and while slightly pouting, they were far from coarse. The expression of the mouth would have been perhaps sensuous, had not a smile of the most fascinating amiability been constantly playing upon it,—at times scarcely perceptible, though still lingering in girlish coyness there—at others more expansive in its unaffected sweetness and winning attraction. Then the teeth were as white, and as perfect, and as pure as two strings of pearls; and the breath was as fragrant as that of the early Spring zephyr passing over the parterres of nascent flowers.

Her neck was not actually short, but wanted the graceful arching to render it beautiful and the statuesque carriage to make it dignified. Its delicate fairness was however a counterbalance for the deficiencies just mentioned;—and then the bust of the Princess was superb beyond the cavil of an honest and impartial criticism. The bosoms were full—plump—well divided—and of stainless whiteness,—rich in the mature luxuriance of womanhood's grandest charm, but not protuberant enough to be pronounced matron-like. On the contrary, the whole aspect of the Princess wore an air of virgin freshness and wholesome health which contrasted favourably and strikingly with the appearance of some of the pale, sickly, and faded beauties of the English fashionable world,—beauties that "came out" at sixteen and lost all their bloom in the dissipation of four or five London winters—thus looking already old, and certainly *passee* at one-and-twenty! But here was this Princess of four years older still, retaining all the first freshness of youth unimpaired—with a natural glow upon her cheeks—a willowy elasticity of form—and a complexion that was capable of standing the test of daylight after having been pronounced lovely in the gorgeous saloons flooded with lustre.

The Princess was of middling stature—but of sufficient height for real womanly dignity. But in that stiffness and starchness which make Courtiers and Court ladies resemble animated statues, her Royal Highness was certainly deficient. All her motions and attitudes were accompanied with the unstudied grace so charmingly characteristic of childhood: the tutelage of a Court Master of the Ceremonies and the lessons of the dancing-master were never apparent in the carriage, gait, and movements of Caroline of Brunswick. And in unison with this natural ease which thus adhered to her, and which rendered her manners as bewitching as her disposition was gay, her clear soft voice sounded harmoniously and joyously as the melody of a May morning when all nature is putting up its hymn of thanksgiving and exultation to the almighty Creator,—that hymn which is conveyed in the song of the bird, the hum of the insect, the rustling of the leaves, and the rippling of the silver stream!

Joyous in its sweet and expressive music was that voice, the accents of which imparted tenderness to her own sonorous native language, or set forth all the harmonious cadences of that charming French tongue in which she loved to shape and give utterance to her thoughts.

The figure of the Princess was graceful and symmetrical: her hands and feet were small—her ankles well turned. Though scrupulously cleanly and nice in her person, she detested the frippery of gorgeous apparel and delighted in plain attire. Having no ambition as a princess and no vanity as a woman, she remained as true to her own ingenuous, unsophisticated, and artless nature as the training she had experienced would permit. She was in all respects a true-hearted, well-meaning, and amiable creature—one who would have shone with all the decorations of domestic virtues had she been placed in a humbler sphere, and whom it was a sin and a cruelty to shackle with the ice-chains of Courtly ceremony and restrain with the galling manacles of fashionable formalities. A cottage and not a throne should have been her portion: a worthy and unambitious man and not a prince should have been her partner in this life. In her nature were all the noblest elements of woman's character—in her disposition were all the most amiable features and in her manners all the most endearing traits that can possibly adorn her sex!

Such was the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

And now we find her decked out in the costliest apparel—with plumage waving over her brow and diamonds shining upon her hair—with the purest pearls around her still whiter neck and more stainless bosom—and attended by a courtier the prim stiffness and habitual starchness of whose appearance and manner constituted as it were an additional chain to imprison her mind within the sphere of cold formality and solemn ceremoniousness.

Nevertheless—though she felt ill at ease and was naturally in a flutter of suspense and anxiety to behold the man whom she was to receive as a husband—she could not restrain herself from conversing with the unaffected frankness that was habitual to her.

"I regret that your Royal Highness should not have been more favourably impressed with the manner and bearing of her most gracious Majesty," said the courtier, in comment upon one of the remarks which the Princess had just made.

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury," exclaimed Caroline, with a smile of ill-subdued archness, "you will yourself admit the appearance of such a stately dame, so prim and awe-inspiring——"

"May it please your Royal Highness," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury, with a slow, measured, and ceremonial bow,—"I am bound to hint to your Royal Highness in the most respectful manner in the world, and yet with a profound seriousness, upon the inconvenience—I will not say impropriety—of applying the word *dear* to me. And however great the honour——"

"Oh! pray do not tease me now with a homily, my lord," cried the Princess, somewhat pettishly: then, immediately afterwards bursting into a merry laugh, she said in her joyous tones, "But where can the harm possibly be—since your lordship is quite old enough to be my father?"

"This observation in itself savours of an inconsiderateness which I should denominate rudeness

on the part of any one save her Royal Highness," observed the Earl of Malmesbury, with another low and measured salutation.

"Are you offended, my lord?" asked Caroline, with an air of unfeigned concern. "If so, I implore your pardon—for I would not give you pain for all the world. You have been very good to me—bestowing upon me the best possible advice: and although I scarcely recollect at this moment a single point you have so strenuously laboured to impress upon me——"

"What! is it possible that I understand your Royal Highness correctly?" exclaimed the Earl of Malmesbury, lifting up his hands and raising his eyes in mingled horror and astonishment. "Now that your Royal Highness is touching upon the critical moment—that moment for which I so earnestly, anxiously, and honestly strove to prepare the mind of your Royal Highness——"

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury—my lord, I mean," cried the Princess, hastily correcting herself,—"suppose I assure you that I have retained in my memory all the valuable advice your lordship has given me—will that satisfy you?"

"I am afraid your Royal Highness would be insincere in making such a statement after the preceding avowal," said the courtier, with a deep gravity alike of tone and manner.

"I know that I am a giddy foolish creature at times, my good friend," proceeded the Princess, in the same rattling chatter-box tone as before: "but you must pardon me if I frankly confess that you have altogether bewildered me with the numerous pieces of advice you have given me on different occasions. My memory is like a sieve in that respect. Heigho! I wish I was at Brunswick tying up my plants and feeding my birds!"

"Your Royal Highness is guilty of a great indiscretion in expressing such a sentiment aloud—at the very moment when his Royal Highness may be approaching the door," said the Earl, in a tone of solemn remonstrance.

"But if he does not hear me, there is no harm in saying what I think?" cried the Princess, with a look so sweetly deprecatory of the nobleman's displeasure that had he not been a heartless courtier—a mere automaton capable of only just so much mechanical action and feeling as form and ceremony allowed—he would have returned the kindest answer and in the most paternal spirit to the observation of that ingenuous, candid, and unsophisticated being.

"Your Royal Highness must only say what you think when it is consistent with the strict rules of etiquette," was the cold and worldly remark which struck upon the Princess like an ice-wind pouring into a warm room through a suddenly opened casement.

"But I presume I may *think* what I choose," said Caroline.

"It would be better not, your Royal Highness," responded the courtier.

"How! are not our thoughts our own in this country?" cried the Princess in amazement.

"Assuredly not," answered the Earl. "We must *think* as well as *act* according to fashion: nay—we must even *look* and *move* according to the same rigid rule—and as for our conversation——"

"Oh! then my father's Court is actually more liberal than your vaunted English one?" exclaimed the Princess, on whose spirits a sudden damp had been thrown by this conversation.

"The Court of His Majesty my gracious Sovereign is the most particular, the best conducted, and the purest with regard to morals, in all the world," observed Lord Malmesbury, enunciating his opinions with as much dogmatic sententiousness as if he were proclaiming axioms.

"But with all those qualifications a terrible tyranny may be blended," said the Princess; "and really your code of etiquette strikes me as being particularly severe. It converts human beings into mere machines."

"So they are in the presence of kings," observed the Earl.

"It checks all the natural gush of pure and honest feelings," continued her Royal Highness.

"There must be no feeling save that of loyalty at Court," said Malmesbury.

"It engenders selfishness and heartlessness," added Caroline.

"Hearts are not known within this sphere," rejoined the courtier.

"Upon my word, I begin to think you are quite correct," exclaimed her Royal Highness drily, as she threw herself back in the chair and stretched out her feet towards the fire.

"May I humbly and respectfully observe," said the Earl, "that the attitude which your Royal Highness has just assumed would not be pleasing to the Prince were he to notice it."

"Why not?" demanded Caroline. "My feet are cold—and I warm them."

"But your Royal Highness must not have cold feet," replied Malmesbury.

"How on earth am I to prevent it?" exclaimed the Princess, pettishly.

"I cannot say. All I can point out to your Royal Highness is that it is inconsistent with etiquette," was the dogmatic response.

"At every turn I am encountered by the word *etiquette!*" cried the Princess.

"And your Royal Highness must never forget to measure every syllable you speak, every mouthful you eat, every step you take, every attitude you assume, every look you cast, and every letter you write, by the standard of etiquette."

"That is to say," observed Caroline, bitterly, "I am henceforth to look upon my existence as being confined to one abode of sensations—and even these I dare not conjure up for myself, but must take them as they are chosen for me. I have heard of the Roman vestals being immured in living tombs when they happened to go astray——"

"An unmarried lady should know nothing of women going astray," interrupted Lord Malmesbury, accompanying the objurgatory comment with the wonted grave salutation.

"But every lady who has arrived at years of discretion—whether married or unmarried—is aware that errors and faults of that kind *do* exist," exclaimed Caroline; "and it would be a wretched affectation to pretend ignorance on that point. For my part I never do."

"Your Royal Highness has too much candour in your disposition," said Malmesbury, with an accent of grave rebuke.

"Too much candour! But is not candour a virtue?"

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness. And yet——"

"Then how can I have too much of any virtue?"

"Virtues are often inconsistent with the etiquette of Courts and high life," observed Malmesbury.

"But in proportion as we divest ourselves of virtues, we must naturally assume vices in their place," exclaimed the Princess.

"The conventional laws of etiquette stamp vices *as* virtues in such cases," rejoined Malmesbury.

"Then, in a word, I am expected to throw off my natural skin and assume an artificial one altogether?" said Caroline.

"May I be permitted to observe that the allusion to your Royal Highness's——I really cannot repeat the word——savoured of indelicacy?" remarked the courtier, with many deprecatory bows and much shame-faced hesitation.

"Allusion to what, in heaven's name?" demanded Caroline, in perfect amazement. "Who made the allusion?"

"Your Royal Highness," was the response.

"And to what did I allude, then?"

"It is impossible—quite impossible——Oh! no—I could not think of repeating——"

"Then how am I to know another time?"

"True!" ejaculated Malmesbury. "And for that reason I must explain myself. Your Royal Highness spoke of your Royal Highness's—ahem!—your Royal Highness's—skin!"

And his lordship gave a great gasp, as if it were with an exhausting effort that he had brought himself to utter so dreadful a word;—while the Princess, after staring at him for nearly a minute in order to ascertain whether he could possibly be serious, threw herself back in her chair and yielded to a fit of such hearty laughter that the joyous peals might have been heard, and very likely were, in the adjacent rooms.

The Earl of Malmesbury was now perfectly aghast. This laughter was, in his estimation, most vulgar—most commonplace—most plebeian—most indecent. The Prince might arrive at any moment;—and what would *he* think of a royal lady who could still be as merry as a school-girl? The thing was altogether preposterous: it was intolerable—and Lord Malmesbury ventured to approach the Princess and stand before her, making six or seven consecutive bows full of ominous meaning.

"Well—what is wrong now?" demanded the hilarious Princess, with the tears running down those cheeks on which the usual bloom was now heightened into a perfect glow by the enthusiasm of her merriment. "What is wrong now, my lord?"

"That laughter, may it please your Royal Highness," was the response.

"What! would you have me laugh on the other side of my mouth?" exclaimed Caroline, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Permit me to observe that the phrase '*Laugh on the other side of the mouth,*' is not by any means a pretty one," said the Earl. "It savours of the nursery."

"Ah! would to heaven I were yet there—and that I had never grown up to leave it!" exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of deep feeling, as a presentiment of approaching evil suddenly struck like a chill to her heart. "But let us go back to the opening topic of our conversation," she said, after a few moments' profound pause. "You were asking me how I liked the reception which I experienced at the hands of the Royal Family? I will answer you frankly. The King was warm and cordial towards me: but there was something so singular in his look that I really fancied he was going crazy again."

"Your Royal Highness!" ejaculated Malmesbury, throwing up his arms in a perfect consternation. "It is almost as bad as treason to give utterance to such dreadful words."

"What! is the truth treason in England?" inquired the Princess, with the most unaffected ingenuousness. "I thought that you Englishmen boasted of your freedom and your glorious Constitution: but I have not been many hours in your country without hearing quite enough to convince me that your vaunted liberty is all nonsense."

"May I beseech your Royal Highness?" exclaimed the Earl, glancing with intense uneasiness towards the door.

"Suppose the Prince did come in at this moment," said Caroline, "he would not be angry with me for expressing such an opinion as that which I have just enunciated. But I will return to the topic whence your interjected remonstrance led me aside. Well, then, the King received me warmly and cordially—the Queen with a manner which might have been stately courtesy, but which assuredly appeared to me to be a studied coldness. However, I care nothing at all for her or her humours——"

"Good heavens! your Royal Highness speaks thus of the Queen?" ejaculated Malmesbury, turning up the whites of his eyes.

"And wherefore not?" demanded Caroline. "My aunt the Princess-Abbess one day at Brunswick whispered in my ear that the Queen of England was known as '*Old Snuffy Charlotte!*'"

"God forgive me for being the listener to such treason!" murmured the Earl of Malmesbury, his countenance now elongating to a degree which could not have been exceeded were he about to be hanged.

"As for the Princesses Sophia and Amelia," continued Caroline, without stopping to take much notice of the prim courtier's distress at her observations,—"they are nice, unassuming, amiable young women—and I am certain we shall get on famously together. They are very handsome, too—and splendid figures: but both of them look as if they were married—or ought to be. They have a certain matronly air about them——"

"Such observations, may it please your Royal Highness, are decidedly improper," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury.

"Nothing pleases your lordship," said Caroline, impatiently. "If the Prince be only one-tenth as particular——But talking of the Prince reminds me that I have not expressed my opinion of the Dukes of Cumberland and Clarence. The former looks like a murderous ruffian—and the latter like an idiot."

The Earl of Malmesbury was about to remonstrate for the hundredth time when a page entered—approached his lordship—whispered a few words—and immediately retired.

"Your Royal Highness," said the nobleman, "let me implore you to recollect all the good counsel

wherewith I have at different times endeavoured to prepare you for the solemn moment that is now at hand!"

"Then the Prince has arrived?" said Caroline, her heart fluttering with expectation: and at the next moment she heaved a sigh as she thought of the young, the handsome, and the far-off Baron Bergami!

CHAPTER CLXXVII.

THE MEETING.

The preceding conversation between Caroline of Brunswick and the Earl of Malmesbury, and which was carried on in the French language, has no doubt tended to throw some additional light upon the character of that amiable princess. A child of nature, art and artifice had not entirely weaned her from the habit of thinking and acting as nature prompted;—and it has doubtless struck the reader that to an almost girlish candour and juvenile ingenuousness of disposition, she united a keen appreciation of right and wrong—an accurate discrimination between justice and injustice—and a power of separating the artificial from the real, the dross from the pure ore, in her estimation of individuals, of society, or of things. Her natural quickness at rejoinder and repartee made her a formidable antagonist against a person who had a bad argument to sustain;—and the occasional freedoms of speech in which she indulged, and which can scarcely be called levities, must not be judged according to the English standard of etiquette and delicacy, but must be attributed to the greater license allowed by continental manners and customs in that respect.

But we shall prefer the plan of suffering the true character of the Princess Caroline to develop itself gradually to the reader, in proportion as the narrative itself proceeds, rather than pause on this occasion to chronicle a lengthened commentary on the subject. We will therefore at once hasten to observe that scarcely had the deep-drawn sigh heaved to the memory of Baron Bergami, escaped her lips, when the Prince of Wales entered the apartment.

Caroline instantaneously rose from her chair and advanced to meet her inteuded husband.

Rapid was the glance which each threw at the other,—with a mutural curiosity, eager and intense on either side, to know the *best* or the *worst* that was to be gleaned in that first transitory survey!

Simultaneously as their looks met, so did they fall for an instant: then they encountered each other again—and this time the eyes of the Princess were cast down beneath the bolder, and stronger, and more searching scrutiny that her intended husband now bestowed upon her.

The Prince went thither already so complete a prey to prejudice, that had he found in the Princess an angel of perfection, his imagination would have prompted him to behold heaven's own radiance through the dingy medium of earth's grossest atmosphere. It was not that he had merely been assured she was not beautiful: but pains had been systematically taken to render her an object of loathing, abhorrence, and disgust in respect to those very points on which he was known to be most particular. Thus, although at the very first glance he saw enough to convince him that she was not quite so repulsive as he had been led to suppose, yet the inveteracy of pre-conceived impressions would not allow him to behold sufficient to afford him any pleasing surprise or agreeable disappointment.

On the side of the Prince, therefore, it was a very bad opinion slightly improved by the first survey: but on that of the Princess it was a very good opinion much moderated by the same result *He* had expected to find her a disgusting creature —whereas he could not help acknowledging at the first glance that the portraiture had been overcoloured: *she* had expected to encounter the very personification of all masculine beauty, dignity, grace, affability, and fascination—whereas she could not help thinking that her future husband was somewhat stout, that his countenance had a drunken looking flush, and that he was by no means the exquisite Adonis public report, private letters, and his own portrait had represented him.

Thus, within the first minute of their encounter —and before a single word was exchanged—the Princess rose a few degrees in the estimate of the Prince, while he fell proportionately in her judgment.

But scarcely had those glances been exchanged, —glances which engendered impressions, or rather altered and modified pre-conceived ones, with the rapidity which thought alone can achieve,—scarcely had the royal couple found themselves standing face to face, when the Earl of Malmesbury ceremoniously introduced them to each other.

Then the Princess, in obedience to a hint previously given by that noble oracle of courtly etiquette, knelt down at the feet of her intended husband: while the latter, actuated by the observances of the same conventional code, hastened to raise her and touch her forehead with his lips. But scarcely had he performed this ceremony when he turned rudely, brutally, and even savagely away; —and, dragging Malmesbury aside, hastily whispered, "I am altogether overcome: she is not a fit wife for me! Get me a glass of brandy—or I shall be ill."

"Permit me to remind your Royal Highness," said the grave, solemn, and seutentious Malmesbury, "that the rules of etiquette make no mention of brandy on such an occasion as the present."

"Damn the rules of etiquette!" ejaculated the Prince brutally. "I will go to the Queen and tell her that I'll sooner forfeit my right to the crown than take that German slut as my wife."

And with these words the heir-apparent to the British throne—*the first gentleman in Europe*—flung himself out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

Utterly discomfitted, the Earl of Malmesbury staggered against the wall—perfectly aghast at the extraordinary scene which had just taken place, and with all his notions relative to Court etiquette thrown into such a complete jumble that if anybody had asked him at the moment whether it was proper to stand upon one's head or one's heels in the King's presence, he would have been totally incompetent to solve the difficulty.

The interview between the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick had lasted exactly *three minutes*;—and on seeing him depart in the pre-

cipitate manner just mentioned, the Princess was for a few moments a prey to the deepest indignation. Her pride was wounded—and she felt as if a cruel outrage had been perpetrated against her. But her natural kindness of disposition and good humour speedily came to her aid;—and, accosting Lord Malmesbury with a smile, she said, "Was it in pursuance of your English rules of etiquette that his Royal Highness fled so abruptly?"

"Ah! pardon him, royal lady," exclaimed the nobleman, who, being recalled to himself by that very pertinent question, suddenly perceived the absolute necessity of giving some gloss to the brutal rudeness of the Prince. "It was natural that his Royal Highness should be deeply moved on such an occasion."

"But methought I heard him give vent to the favourite oath of you Englishmen," observed Caroline, with a look of increasing good-humour: "was it not so?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the Earl, unhesitatingly giving utterance to an impudent falsehood "His Royal Highness could not possibly be guilty of such an unpardonable breach of courtesy. At the dinner-table presently he will shine to that advantage which will win the affections as well as secure the admiration of your Royal Highness. As to his personal appearance—I need scarcely ask your Royal Highness whether you are well pleased——"

"Oh! indeed, he is much fatter than I expected to find him," exclaimed the Princess, speaking out her real sentiments as freely, boldly, and ingenuously as she would have passed an opinion upon a picture: "and I must likewise observe that he has a somewhat dissipated look."

"Such remarks, may it please your Royal Highness," said Lord Malmesbury gravely, "are quite out of place."

"Then why did you question me upon the subject?" demanded the Princess, surveying the cour-

tier with surprise and mistrust—for she began to think that there was a great deal of cold selfishness in his doctrines and insincerity in his conduct.

"According to the routine of Courts, there are set answers to set questions," replied his lordship.

"Such is not altogether the case at my father's Court," observed the Princess, with a sigh: and she wished that she was safe back again in Brunswick.

The discourse between herself and Lord Malmesbury was now interrupted by the entrance of Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who conducted the Princess to the apartments prepared for her temporary accommodation in Saint James's Palace.

While submitting to the process of the dinner-toilette, Caroline chatted familiarly with the three ladies; and to the Countess of Jersey she was especially polite and amiable. Mrs. Harcourt, the Bed-chamber Woman, was a middle-aged person—very servile and very garrulous: Lady Jersey has already been described;—and it only remains for us to observe that Mrs. Harvey Aston was a very handsome woman, about four-and-thirty years of age, and one of the Prince's numerous mistresses. Thus two of the royal voluptuary's paramours were installed in close intimacy about the person of the Princess who in three days was to become his wife.

When the dinner-toilette was nearly concluded, Caroline suddenly observed, "By the bye, my dear Jersey, do you know wherefore I have taken such an amazing fancy to you?"

"I am at a loss to conceive what humble merit on my part should have won me the honour of your Royal Highness's favour," was the response delivered by the Countess, in the usual sycophantic style of courtly phraseology.

"Your fame reached my ears in Germany," continued the Princess; "and rumour declared that you were not only a very handsome woman, but also one of the Prince's best friends."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Countess, the warm red blood boiling scarlet up to the very surface of her beautiful polished skin of delicate olive: and, affecting to be busied at the toilette-table, she turned aside to conceal her confusion.

"Yes—such were the rumours which reached my ears," proceeded Caroline, in her wonted good-humoured, inconsiderate manner, and without the slightest intention to produce any excitement either in a bad or good sense: "and though, to tell you the candid truth, I can pretty well guess the meaning of your great friendship with the Prince, I am not angry now, nor shall I be jealous hereafter. I am not such an idiot as to suppose that a man, with such advantages and opportunities, will prove a saint; and I have made up my mind not to vex him in any way. You may therefore tell him, my dear Jersey, the first time you happen to be alone with him—which I dare say will be tolerably soon," added her Royal Highness, laughing heartily,—"you may assure him, I say, that so far from being jealous of you, I at once treated you with marked cordiality and signalled you as one of my best friends."

"Is this sarcasm—wit—or pure stolidity?" demanded Lady Jersey, in a hasty whisper, of Mrs. Harvey Aston, as they stood together at the toilette-table.

"Pure stolidity—utter folly—girlish nonsense," was the reply given in an equally prompt manner and low tone. "She is a complete fool."

"A downright idiot," responded the Countess of Jersey: then, turning towards the Princess, she said aloud, "I thank your Royal Highness for the promise of friendship so graciously made me: but I cannot undertake to become the bearer of any verbal messages to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"Well, then, I will take an opportunity of putting him at his ease with respect to yourself," said Caroline, in her wonted off-hand manner of honest sincerity, in which however there was nothing coarse and nothing vulgar.

The toilette was complete—and the Princess, attended by the three ladies, repaired to the banquetting-room. The King received her with marked kindness—the Queen, who was a thoroughly heartless woman, with as studied a reserve. The Princesses Sophia, Amelia, and Augusta were present on the occasion, and treated Caroline of Brunswick with the utmost tenderness and consideration. They observed the ill-natured coldness of demeanour assumed by their mother: and they endeavoured to atone for that scandalous inhospitality and cold-blooded cruelty by the warmth of their own attentions. The Duke of Clarence was good-naturedly soft and harmlessly foolish—as he always showed himself—for he was scarcely two removes from an idiot: while the Duke of Cumberland, whose countenance expressed all the darkest passions of the human soul, endeavoured to render himself agreeable, but was viewed by the Princess of Brunswick with emotions of mingled terror and suspicion.

And how did the Prince of Wales comport himself upon this occasion? As a matter of course he sate next to his intended bride; and, for common decency's sake, he was civil and attentive to her—but no more! There was naught of cordiality in his manner; and as for love—*that* was out of the question. Nevertheless he watched her with an eager curiosity, and listened with a deep attention to every word she uttered. For he felt that his honour was involved, or at all events his pride was concerned, in the qualifications and attributes of the woman who was to become his wife. Thus was he upon this occasion more inclined to study her impartially and judge her honestly than during the *three minutes* they were together ere now.

He saw and could not help acknowledging within himself that if she were even the devil, she had been painted much blacker than she really was. Her teeth were sound and good—as fine as those which adorned any of the Prince's most cherished mistresses: her hair was of a pure auburn—silken, luxuriant, and glossy;—and her bust was evidently superb. Thus far the account was in favour of the Princess. But on the other hand the poison of prejudice and the venom of malignant bias had been so deeply instilled into the heart, soul, and senses of the Prince, that he viewed all her little amiabilities as failings, all her peculiarities as faults, and all her inexperiences as downright vulgarities. Her good humour he took for familiarity—her hilarity for coarseness—her cheerfulness for unmannerly forwardness. In that natural generosity which made her treat her lady-dependants as equals instead of inferiors, and prompted her to elevate *them* to the rank of *her* friends, the Prince beheld a most heinous departure from the usages of Courts;—and in every display of nature's pure, honest, and unadul-

terated feeling on the part of her Royal Highness her intended husband would persist in seeing naught save the most unpardonable solecisms with regard to etiquette. But no pen can depict his horror, amazement, and disgust, when the well-meaning and artless Caroline seized an opportunity to whisper in his ear the promised communication relative to the Countess of Jersey!

The fact was that her Royal Highness had been *ver*-tutored by Malmesbury. One of his lessons was that if she ever became aware of any of the Prince's intrigues, she must be cautious not to exhibit the slightest jealousy;—and thus the inexperienced Princess was now hurried by her good intentions into the calamitous fault of proclaiming to the Prince *in words* that forbearance which, if she were disposed to show it at all, should only have been displayed *in conduct*. And the Prince himself was too narrow-minded in his genteel fastidiousness to understand or appreciate the generous purpose which his intended wife entertained—and too deeply prejudiced against her to pardon the bungling fashion into which her very innocence and inexperience hurried her when desirous of manifesting that purpose. The incident, therefore, only tended to enhance his disgust at her manners, conduct, and style of conversation;—and these deepening impressions of disfavour were by no means counterbalanced by the improved opinion he was compelled to form in respect to her personal appearance. He drank copiously to drown thought; and the Princess, with her natural quickness perceiving that he was addicted to the bottle, found herself rapidly becoming more and more disenchanted with regard to the *first gentleman* and *most polished Prince* in Europe!

The dinner was over—the guests were retiring—Caroline of Brunswick had withdrawn to her own apartments—and at length the Prince of Wales found an opportunity of speaking a few words in private to his royal mother. Conducting the Queen to the farther end of the superb saloon where the evening had been passed, he said in a low deep tone, "Your Majesty can now express an opinion upon the Princess!"

"George, I am sick at heart—no—that is not the feeling," exclaimed Queen Charlotte, with a concentrated bitterness in her accent and an almost fiend-like expression in her looks: "but I am devoured with rage and indignation to think that you should be thus sacrificed! It is all your father's doing—and you know he is as obstinate as Satan himself. I warned him against this alliance—I implored—I threatened: but all was unavailing—and now my worst fears are confirmed. Caroline is not a fit wife for you—and the marriage will be an unhappy one!"

"Why did not your Majesty warn, implore, and threaten *me*, instead of my father?" demanded the Prince, his words and looks both expressing the bitterest sarcasm. "Methinks that I was the principal person to whom you should have deigned the revelation of your real sentiments: but I never even knew that your Majesty had objected to this match until this evening."

"And who told you so, George?" exclaimed the Queen.

"Your manner towards the Princess made me suspect it," was the answer; "and Lady Jersey confirmed the fact."

"Yes — Lady Jersey and myself had a few minutes' conversation together after dinner," observed the Queen, looking her son very hard in the face, as if to ascertain how much the Countess had really told him: then, perceiving a sardonic smile beginning to wreath the Prince's lips, she said hastily, "But I suppose that whatever I *did* state to Lady Jersey will be made known to you within an hour or two—and therefore I may as well give you the explanation myself. I told her, then," added Queen Charlotte, a sinister gloom lowering over her harsh and disagreeable features, while her voice sank at the same time to the lowest possible whisper,—"I told Lady Jersey that henceforth I would be *her* friend if she would continue to be *your* friend! And more than that, I assured her that when the storm should come—that storm which is inevitable—I would take *her* part and *your* part, whatever may betide."

"Ah! then your Majesty already anticipates a domestic convulsion at Carlton House?" said the Prince, still with a concentrated bitterness in his tone: "and you are preparing in time for the part you shall play when my wife and I go to loggerheads? That is the plain English of it—and much plainer English indeed than I am usually accustomed to speak."

"Put what construction you please upon my conduct, George," observed the Queen, after a few moments' consideration: "but let one thing at least be engraven on your memory—and let it serve as the text for all your self-communings at a future day!"

"And that one thing?" demanded the Prince, surveying his royal mother with mingled interest and curiosity. "What is it?"

"That in *me* the Princess Caroline has a bitter and an unforgiving enemy," rejoined the Queen, the words hissing snake-like through the lips that were white and quivering.

Bad and unprincipled as was the heir-apparent—heartless, cruel, and selfish as his disposition might be—he was nevertheless struck with a species of horror at this cold-blooded announcement on the part of his mother. A man may be a murderer himself, and can yet think well of human nature generally: but if he suddenly finds out that his own mother is a murderess—the being who possesses the *prestige* of all-excelling goodness in his eyes—his confidence in everything human is annihilated in an instant. Thus was it with the Prince of Wales. His own mother had suddenly thrown off the mask and revealed herself to him as a fiend in female shape;—and he gazed upon her in mingled horror, wonderment, and distress.

But she darted upon him a look full of contempt as much as to imply that even yet he did not half comprehend the true meaning of the words to which she had given utterance: then, quitting him abruptly, she retired for the night.

CHAPTER CLXXVIII.

THE DISGUISED ONE.

We must now return to the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, who quitted the sponging-house together in the manner already

described. The carriage which had brought Eleanor and the Duchess of Devonshire to Chancery Lane belonged to the former: she and Miss Plantagenet accordingly entered the vehicle, which drove rapidly away towards the West End.

"Whither can I have the pleasure of taking you?" inquired the Countess, when she and her young companion were ensconced side by side in the luxurious carriage.

"Do not allow any consideration on my account to interfere with your ladyship's arrangements," said Miss Plantagenet.

"I have no arrangements fixed for this morning—unless indeed it be to call in the Edgware Road," observed the Countess. "It is somewhat early to pay such a visit; but as I am very intimate with the lady to whose residence I am about to proceed, the time of day matters little. If you feel disposed to accompany me, Miss Plantagenet, I shall be glad of your society—and the carriage will then be at your service to take you to your own abode."

"I shall experience much pleasure in accompanying your ladyship," replied Miss Plantagenet.

The Countess of Desborough accordingly pulled the check-string and ordered the coachman to drive to Bellenden Priory, Edgeware Road. The vehicle rolled rapidly along; and during the half-hour which elapsed ere it stopped, Eleanor and her young companion conversed upon those general topics which could alone engage the attention of two persons who were almost strangers to each other. But though thus strangers, yet a certain degree of cordiality, if not a positive intimacy, at once sprang up between the Countess and Miss Plantagenet: inasmuch as the former looked upon the latter as the cousin of her own dearest and best friend, the Duchess of Devonshire.

Presently the carriage stopped at Bellenden Priory; and while the footman dismounted from behind the vehicle and rang the bell at the gate, Miss Plantagenet surveyed the large rambling edifice with some degree of attention from the window of the vehicle.

"It is a strange old building," remarked the Countess; "but very handsomely fitted-up within. Have you ever been here before?"

"Never," replied Miss Plantagenet. "I have however heard a great deal relative to the Marchioness of Bellenden and her law-suit with the Montgomery family. But I have never seen her ladyship—at least, not to my knowledge——"

"You will find her an amiable, unassuming, kind-hearted woman," observed the Countess of Desborough. "She lives in a comparatively strict seclusion: but my husband and myself are amongst the few friends who enjoy her intimacy."

At this moment the garden gate was opened by a porter in plain livery; and the Countess of Desborough alighted from the carriage, followed by Miss Plantagenet. Traversing the garden, which was laid out in a beautifully picturesque style, they reached the front entrance—ascended the marble steps—and were conducted by the domestic into a spacious hall surrounded by suits of armour, antique vases, and statues. A splendid staircase, with oaken ballusters magnificently carved, led to a landing ornamented with porcelain jars filled with curious artificial flowers; and thence opened the drawing-room into which the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet were shown.

The Marchioness of Bellenden, who was alone in the apartment when the visitresses were announced, rose from the sofa and hastened forward to welcome Lady Desborough in the kindest manner: but the instant that she threw her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet, she started visibly—then bowed hastily and distantly—and, turning abruptly away, conducted the Countess to a seat.

Eleanor did not observe this little excitement—or rather transitory flurry—on the part of the Marchioness: but Miss Plantagenet *did*, and was evidently much surprised thereat. Indeed, as this mysterious young lady took a seat of her own accord, she murmured to herself, "The Marchioness cannot possibly suspect who I am—for I never saw her before in all my life, to my knowledge; and it is scarcely probable that she should know *me!*"

"I really quite forgot to introduce my young friend to you, Laura!" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough: "but you will pardon the oversight, which was occasioned by the pleasure I experienced in seeing you after some weeks' separation. Miss Plantagenet—a cousin of the Duchess of Devonshire——"

"Miss Plantagenet is welcome as *your* friend, Eleanor," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, in whose tone and manner there was evidently something which implied mistrust or suspicion, or else pure annoyance at the introduction of a stranger to the Priory: but immediately subduing the sentiment, whatever it were, her ladyship threw upon Miss Plantagenet a benignant smile, observing, "You are welcome to the Priory: and if I did not give you that assurance the moment you entered the room, it was because the almost recluse-like retirement in which I live renders me slow in greeting new-comers until I learn who they are."

Miss Plantagenet gave a graceful inclination of the head in acknowledgment of these explanatory remarks; and the Marchioness of Bellenden, turning towards Lady Desborough, said, "I have not seen you since Stamford Manor came into your possession. How do you like your new property?"

"Very much, so far as the house and grounds are concerned," replied the Countess: "but the associations are gloomy and dispiriting. You must remember that it was within those walls the unfortunate and guilty Lady Stamford put a period to her own existence——"

"Oh! but you possess too strong a mind, Eleanor," exclaimed the Marchioness, "to be influenced by superstitious terrors."

"Still there are feelings of horror and dread which will grow upon us at times, even if we put no faith in apparitions," observed the Countess. "But generally speaking, both the Earl and myself are well pleased with our new estate. And now tell me, dear Laura, how progresses your own law-suit—and likewise that affair of the deserving young artist, Mr. George Woodfall——"

"Not a word upon either subject at present—not a syllable!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, with an excitement which evidently amazed the Countess of Desborough as being something so unusual on the part of one whose habitual manner was so serene, tranquil, and benignant.

"You cannot fancy, my dear Laura," observed

the Countess, "that Miss Plantagenet is either interested in the topics which I ventured to broach, or capable of repeating elsewhere anything that we may say confidentially here."

"I impute nothing whatever to your friend, Eleanor," said the Marchioness, in a tone of decision: "but surely the matters to which you alluded can have no possible interest for Miss Plantagenet—and therefore to discuss them, would be to exclude her from the conversation altogether."

"I yield to your wishes, Laura," observed the Countess.

"When did you come up to town?" inquired Lady Bellenden.

"Last evening," was the response. "And on my arrival in Berkeley Square I was much distressed to learn that my friend Mrs. Fitzherbert was involved in the most cruel embarrassments. Indeed, to tell you the truth, she had been arrested for debt, and was in a dreadful place which is called a lock-up house. Accordingly, the first thing this morning I hastened to Devonshire House; and her Grace instantaneously consented to accompany me to Chancery Lane, where poor Mrs. Fitzherbert was imprisoned. On our arrival there, we found Miss Plantagenet and a certain Lady Lade — a somewhat notorious character whom I was not over well pleased to encounter——"

"I have already assured your ladyship that she is no friend of mine," observed Miss Plantagenet, doubtless entertaining fears for her own reputation after having been found in such questionable society. "She was already at that place when I crossed its threshold last night."

"Ah! then you slept there, Miss Plantagenet?" said the Marchioness of Bellenden, interrogatively. "Were you not alarmed at passing the night in a species of prison?—for such must be the character of the house alluded to."

"The three ladies were altogether in one room," observed the Countess of Desborough; "and I suppose they considered themselves collective and mutual protection. At all events you were not disturbed in the night, I believe?" added Eleanor, turning towards Miss Plantagenet.

"Not in the slightest degree," was the answer.

"Perhaps Miss Plantagenet had a bed to herself and slept soundly," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"Miss Plantagenet, on the contrary, was Mrs. Fitzherbert's companion," remarked the Countess of Desborough. "But really our conversation has turned upon the most trivial and ridiculous details: and I shall therefore hasten to inform you, Laura, that having called at the lock-up house, I was frightened away by the sudden arrival of the Prince. Miss Plantagenet was as unwilling to meet his Royal Highness as I was; and we therefore hurried off together. Then I proposed the visit to Bellenden Priory—and now I have given a full and complete account of myself."

"You will remain and pass the day with me, Eleanor?" said the Marchioness, who did not however give the invitation with that cordiality which claimed a prompt acceptance and forbade a refusal.

"Not on the present occasion," returned the Countess. "The Earl is in town—and I promised to accompany him in the afternoon to pay several visits. Moreover, I am afraid that I have already disturbed you—or interfered with some arrangements——"

"Far from it," interrupted the Marchioness. "You are unkind to make such an observation, Eleanor—since you know that I have not a dearer friend in the world than yourself. But you must come and see me again to-morrow—or next day—and then we will have a long discourse together."

"Be it so," said the Countess. "By the way, what has become of that beautiful girl whom I saw here the last time I called?"

"She is still residing with me," answered Lady Bellenden, with a rapid glance of uneasiness at Miss Plantagenet as she spoke. "A more amiable, virtuous, kind-hearted creature never breathed than my young *protegée*; and were she my own daughter, I could not love her more devotedly than I do. She has endured much sorrow—much persecution likewise——"

"You told me the chief details of her narrative when I was last here," observed the Countess of Desborough. "Poor girl! she is not the only one whom the Prince of Wales has sought to ensnare: but she is one of the very few who have had the courage to resist, and the happiness to escape him!"

While the two ladies were thus discoursing, Miss Plantagenet indulged in a tolerably searching survey of the Marchioness. Indeed, whenever Lady Bellenden was not looking towards her, Miss Plantagenet was devouring her with an ardour somewhat remarkable in a modest and well-behaved young female.

We have stated in a previous chapter that the Marchioness was now about thirty-seven years of age and that she was very handsome. The garb of widowhood which she wore, set off her dazzling complexion to the utmost advantage, and enhanced the soft serenity of expression which usually sate upon her countenance. Her dark chesnut hair, glossy as velvet, appeared in bands beneath the border of the snowy cap which seemed to become her as entirely and completely as if it were in sooth a coquettish appropriation of a peculiar article of vesture to a particular style of beauty. Between the vermilion freshness of the lips the teeth showed white as ivory: the hands were delicately fair and admirably modelled;—and feet, long but narrow, peeped forth from the skirt of the mourning drapery.

Although the high corsage of the dress completely concealed the bosom, and the arms were imprisoned in their long sleeves,—yet was it impossible for even the most inert imagination to do otherwise than depict unto itself the contours of the bust and the symmetry of the arms. Nor less would the admirer of the fair sex have been forced to admit that this general concealment of her rich and glowing beauties only rendered the Marchioness of Bellenden more indescribably charming and enhanced ten thousand times the sensual and seductive power which so splendid a woman must under any circumstances have possessed.

But while Miss Plantagenet was wondering within herself whether the Marchioness entertained any suspicion regarding her,—or whether the little peculiarities in her behaviour were traceable only to a natural prudence and reserve in speaking too

freely before strangers,—while Miss Plantagenet was thus deliberating, we say, the door opened and Rose Foster entered the apartment.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, hastening forward to meet her with a generous enthusiasm,—"I was just making the kindest inquiries concerning you. Allow me to introduce my friend Miss Plan——"

"Oh! what means this masquerading?" cried Rose Foster, with an ejaculation of mingled surprise and alarm, as her looks encountered those of the false Miss Plantagenet: then, instantaneously recollecting certain past incidents, she flew frantically towards the Marchioness of Bellenden, exclaiming, "Save me, dear lady—save me from that nobleman in disguise! He is one of the patrons of the infamous Mrs. Brace——and it can be for no good purpose that Lord Florimel, thus disguised——"

"Lord Florimel!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, a light breaking in upon her, and the whole deception flashing to her mind in a moment.

But the young nobleman—for he indeed it was—had no disposition to remain and face three angry, outraged women. In Rose Foster he had instantaneously recognised that same Camilla Morton whom Mrs. Brace had once offered to sell unto his arms: and the moment she gave vent to the ejaculatory remarks which showed that the recognition was mutual and that his exposure was imminent, he prepared for a hurried retreat. No sooner, therefore, was his name flung forth from the lips of the terrified and astonished girl, than he sprang to the door—threw it open—and rushed towards the stairs. But his foot caught in a mat—he fell heavily—and his forehead came in contact with one of the porcelain vases that adorned the landing.

He heard and saw no more: consciousness had abandoned him!

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When Lord Florimel slowly returned to himself—awaking gradually from the deep trance in which he had been plunged—he found himself lying in bed, but enveloped with a darkness as black as that of a sepulchre. A stupendous silence likewise entombed him: and while no gleam of light reached the eye, no footstep nor voice met the ear.

By degress his ideas began to settle themselves in the proper departments of the brain;—and when he recalled to mind everything that had taken place at the sponging-house—next his ride in the carriage along with Lady Desborough—and lastly, his visit to Bellenden Priory, he raised his hand to his brow to steady the recollections which were rolling in upon his bewildered and attenuated brain. But, ah! was it a bandage which his fingers encountered?—a bandage around his head? Yes—and now he remembered that he had fallen in his endeavour to effect a precipitate retreat from the Priory!

Where was he at present, then? In his own house? No: for on stretching out his arms, he grasped curtains with fringes quite different from any that belonged to the fittings of his own mansion. Was he, then, at the Priory? It was scarcely probable Lady Bellenden would have suffered him to remain there, if it were at all possible to have removed him elsewhere without actually endangering his life!

But while he was yet tossing as it were upon the turmoil of his bewildering reflections, a clock began to chime.

Heavens!—what a thrill of mingled amazement, ecstacy, and suspense, ran through his entire form, as the notes of those musical bells struck upon his ear. For he had heard them before—Oh! he was convinced he had heard them before,—heard them under circumstances, too, the mere reminiscence of which made his whole being glow with rapture, despite of the condition of prostration and exhaustion into the consciousness of which he had just awoke.

The chimes ceased—and all was profoundly still again!

Then raising himself up in the couch, Florimel ascertained with his hands its position in respect to the wall: and afterwards he thrust forth his arms to feel for a particular object near the bed's head. Yes—it was there—it encountered his touch,—that large arm-chair in which he had deposited his clothes on a certain occasion!

More agitated grew his feelings,—but with a blissful and ecstatic emotion, as he pursued his researches. Descending cautiously from the couch,—for he felt that he was so weak as to be scarcely able to sustain himself upon his limbs,—he felt for the table—and then he groped about for the sofa. And he found them,—yes, found them in precisely the position which he had expected—each in the spot which he had so accurately foreknown.

Overcome by the gush of joyous memories and the still more delicious hopes which now sped through his brain, he sank down upon that sofa;—and there he lay for a few minutes, not so much to collect his thoughts as to indulge in the deep luxuriousness which they were rapidly assuming.

Silence and darkness still environed him: but he perceived that the atmosphere was pleasantly warm and delicately perfumed. Suddenly the idea flashed to his mind that the key to the reading of the great secret was at this moment in his possession: in a word, that he need only use his hands and his eyes for a moment to ascertain where he was. For that this was *the boudoir of love and of mystery* he had already obtained the conviction:—but where was it situated?—to what mansion did it belong?—and in what part of London might it be?

Rising from the sofa, Lord Florimel felt his way to the window. The curtains were of thick velvet, and were not only closely drawn, but likewise fastened down the middle with large buttons. He opened them: and his hands now encountered the shutters. These were secured with a massive iron bar running all across, and fixed with a padlock. The key of this padlock was not there: the shutters were therefore immoveable—and not even a single chink nor joint was wide enough to admit a gleam from without, even though it were broad mid-day. But whether it were morning, noon, or night, Florimel was utterly unable to determine.

Quitting the casement, the young nobleman felt his way to the door. He had not the slightest hope of finding it unlocked: and the result was as he had expected. It was well secured—and so firm in its frame-work that his hand could not shake it.

Returning to the sofa, he resumed his reclining posture upon it,—murmuring to himself, "Well, at all events if I am a prisoner, the gaol where I am

confined is one fraught with the most pleasing reminiscences and the most delicious hopes. But I would that my fair gaoler were here with me—the more so, inasmuch as I begin to feel famished for want of food!"

"Think you, dear Florimel, that I should neglect you?" whispered the soft, dulcet, and never-to-be-forgotten voice of the Unknown Lady: and the next instant the young nobleman was clasped in her arms.

One long delicious kiss,—a kiss sustained for upwards of a minute by mouth glued to mouth,—sent a burning thrill through the forms of the paramours thus reunited;—and then the lady, reaching some delicate refreshments from the table, made Florimel partake thereof as he lay half-reclining in her arms and with his head pillowed upon her glowing, naked bosom.

"Tell me, my charming friend," he said, "how long have I been unwell—hours or days? For I am utterly ignorant on that head."

"This is the third day after the accident," murmured the Unknown. "It is the 8th of April—and it is now about seven in the evening. But how you came *here*—how it happens that *I* am your nurse——"

"Then I am not at Bellenden Priory?" said Florimel, hastily.

"Can you think it possible?" demanded the Unknown. "But you must not talk too much now—nor must I engage your attention too long. You have been delirious—and the doctor has given you opiates. In a few moments you must return to your couch, and endeavour to enjoy a sound refreshing sleep. Then to-morrow morning you will awake convalescent; and I shall be enabled to give you such explanations as you require."

"Be it as you say, my charming nurse," cried Florimel, bestowing a warm kiss upon the breast that had just served as his pillow.

He now returned to bed; and when he was once more ensconced in the luxurious couch, the Unknown seated herself in the arm-chair by the side; and, with one of his hands clasped in her own, she seemed anxious and ready to perform all the duties of a good nurse and afford all the tender ministrations of a loving woman.

CHAPTER CLXXIX.

THE MARRIAGE.

We are now about to enter upon one of the most important and interesting episodes of our narrative,—an episode which is marked with a date constituting a fatal era in the lives of two individuals. Yes—fatal to the honour of the vile Prince who swore to love a woman whom he had almost previously made up his mind to hate,—and fatal to the unhappy, amiable, and excellent Princess whom circumstances made the sacrifice to expediency and the victim of a cold-blooded, heartless, and cowardly tyrant!

It was in the evening of the 8th of April, 1795, that the marriage between their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick was celebrated at the Royal Chapel, in St. James's Palace. The King, the Queen, and all the Royal Family were present,—save and except the Duke of York: for this cowardly and incompetent braggart was absent on the continent, where he was leading the British troops into all kinds of disaster, defeat, and disgrace.

We need hardly say that the bridal ceremony was characterised by all the pomp, ostentation, and splendour which the British Court had ever kept up at the expense of the crushed, wronged, and plundered people. The Queen was bedizened with diamonds, while her nostrils were black with snuff: and the precious stones which gemmed the ostrich plumes and shone upon the brows, and necks, and bosoms, and arms of the Princesses and other ladies present, might have paid off a handsome instalment of the National Debt.

The King wore upon his countenance that stolid smile of satisfaction which was peculiar to him: the Queen was stern in her studied composure and severe in her prim stateliness. The Princess Amelia surveyed Caroline of Brunswick with a melancholy interest: for the royal Daughter of England doubtless presaged full well the destiny of her unhappy and as yet unsuspecting cousin!

And Caroline herself—how did she appear upon this solemn and memorable occasion? Nothing could be more touchingly amiable than her demeanour—nothing more winning than her whole aspect. Upon her countenance there was the habitual smile, but beaming faintly though not altogether subdued,—yet mingling with an expression which showed that she felt all the awe-inspiring associations of the ceremony, and that she resigned herself placidly and docilely to the path which had been prepared for her by others and which was not the one of her own choosing. There was also in her look a holy reliance upon the will of the Supreme Being, as the chief arbiter of those destinies which the machinery of Man put into motion, but which He could control at any moment!

And the Prince—how appeared *he* then and there? With a countenance flushed by drinking, and with eyes that swam vacantly in a bacchanalian mist, did he attend at the altar. His licentious looks lingered devouringly upon the much-exposed charms of the Countess of Jersey and Mrs. Harvey Aston;—and he even had the hardihood to bestow a significant smile upon the former—a token of regard which the infamous woman did not fail to greet with a triumphant expression of countenance, and reward with the sweetest wreathing of her red lips.

The Princess Caroline beheld these bare-faced signs of intelligence between the man who in five minutes would be her husband, and the woman who was already her too successful rival: and though for an instant the warm blood rushed to the countenance of the poor victim, and she experienced a sad tightening at the heart,—yet at the next moment she recovered all her self-possession through the aid of her divine temper, her enduring disposition, and her studied resolve to meet with resignation whatever might be in store for her.

And now the ceremony commenced. The Archbishop of Canterbury officiated; and the King himself gave the bride away. As the solemnity progressed, the pious resignation of the Princess deepened into a dejection against which she could not combat;—while the heir-apparent became irritable and impatient. Suddenly he perceived a tear—a pearly tear—fall from the countenance of the Princess on the edge of the velvet cushion whereon she knelt;—and, instead of being softened by that

touching proof of true feminine feelings, the Prince suffered—nay, even forced his imagination to seize upon the circumstance as a motive for self-annoyance. He reasoned within his own breast that Caroline ought to be too happy, too proud, and too grateful at becoming *his* wife, to be enabled to shed a tear: and he looked on that pure tribute of an artless woman's respect and love for the home and parents she had quitted, perhaps for ever,—he looked upon that diamond yielded up from a mine of feelings unfathomable to eyes whose powers of vision were restricted by the grossest worldly selfishness,—he looked upon that tear, we say, as an insult to himself!

The torture which he thus chose to inflict upon his own soul, goaded him to the quick: and he sprang abruptly from his kneeling position. The Archbishop stopped short in the midst of one of the most solemn and impressive portions of the ceremony—and all eyes were turned upon the Prince. A sickening feeling seized on the Princess of Brunswick;—a consternation fell on most of the others present: but an infernal delight sprang up in the hearts of the Queen, Lady Jersey, and Mrs. Harvey Aston. As for Lord Malmesbury—*he* was struck with dismay; and all his notions of etiquette were thrown into the most lamentable confusion.

But this scene was only of a few moments' duration. For the Prince of Wales, instantaneously struck by the conviction that he must either be taken for a drunkard or a madman, mumbled an apology — murmured something about "mistaking the proper time to rise"——and sank down on his knees again.

The sacred service then proceeded without further interruption;— and the only remaining incident worthy of note, relative to the solemn ceremony, was that the Earl of Malmesbury, instead of saying *Amen* along with the rest at the conclusion, gave vent to the word which was uppermost in his mind at the moment—namely, *Etiquette!*

And now the ceremony was over—the ordeal was passed through—the solemn mockery was accomplished—the sacrifice was consummated—and Caroline of Brunswick was now Princess of Wales!

The bridal party quitted the chapel and repaired to the drawing-rooms of the palace, where a brilliant company was already assembled; and her Royal Highness, the newly-married lady, was naturally the "observed of all observers." The quick eye of the sycophantic and servile aristocracy soon perceived, however—aye, in a very few minutes—that the Prince regarded his bride with anything rather than fond affection;—and thus the cue was received as to the opinions to be formed by those lickspittle lords and ladies on a subject concerning which they dared not adopt any sentiments of their own spontaneous initiation.

"My dear Lady Brunel," said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery aside to her friend, "what do you think of the Princess?"

"What does the Prince himself think of her?" inquired the cautious lady thus addressed.

"Do you not perceive that he is restless—dissatisfied—and uneasy, in spite of all his endeavours to conceal the real state of his feelings with the gloss of his brilliant fascinations of look, language, and manner?"

"You are right, my dear Countess," responded Lady Brunel. "And moreover, his Royal Highness is—*flushed*," she added, in a scarcely audible whisper.

"Yes: he has evidently been—ahem!—*drinking*," observed the Countess, in an equally guarded tone.

"And I should say that he was pretty nearly—*tipsy*," rejoined Lady Brunel, now speaking so low that her voice was not more audible than her breathing.

"Yes: quite tipsy," echoed the Dowager-Countess Montgomery. "And *now*, my dear friend, what *do* you think of our new Princess?"

"That it is the coarsest, vulgarest, commonest importation from Germany with which *our* world of fashion has ever been afflicted," was Lady Brunel's prompt rejoinder.

And then the two gossips set themselves industriously to work to tear the Princess of Wales to pieces in the most unmerciful style of that heartless criticism which constitutes so important a feature in the occupation of ladies of fashion.

In another corner of the principal drawing-room an Earl and a Marquis had button-holed each other; and approaching their countenances with so much solemn mystery that the tips of their noses almost touched, they entered with awful caution and dread timidity upon the grand topic.

"Well, my dear friend, what does your lordship think of the bride?" asked the Earl, who was a man of about sixty-five years of age.

"Nay—rather let me hear what *you* think, my lord," said the Marquis, who was about ten years younger. "You have more experience than I in such matters.

"But what do you fancy the Prince thinks of her?" inquired the old Earl, cunningly beating about the bush to glean an opinion before he would venture to express any sentiment of his own.

"Does not your lordship perceive that at this very moment his Royal Highness is conversing with Lady Jersey, and that his back is actually turned towards his bride?" said the Marquis, in a slow and deliberate tone, every syllable he uttered being fraught with significancy.

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Earl: "it is precisely as your lordship represents."

"Well—and *now* what do you think of the Princess?" demanded the Marquis.

"Ah! there's only one opinion to be formed," was the prompt reply; "and that is by no means flattering to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. I suppose, in fact, we must treat her with coldness, and pass the word to our wives and daughters that she is to be *run down*?"

"Just so!" exclaimed the Marquis approvingly. "There can be no doubt as to that being the proper course for us to pursue."

The two nobles accordingly separated, each to find out his family in another part of the room and give them the truly Christian lesson which had just been agreed upon. Oh! the world has never seen and human nature has never been scandalised by a more cruel, remorseless, and cold-blooded set of persons than the English Aristocracy! Their servility is vile beyond all despising, and their heartlessness atrocious beyond all cursing.

The two dialogues we have just given will afford the reader a specimen of the general nature of the conversation which was current in the royal draw-

ing-rooms on the bridal evening. The Prince was the grand fugle-man whose movements were followed by the whole array of fashionables: his conduct towards his new-made wife was taken as a signal to be implicitly obeyed by that phalanx of lords and ladies whom the newspapers next morning denominated the "*elite* of the aristocracy!" Thus was the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick fore-doomed, not only by her own husband—not only by his royal mother and his paramours—but likewise by all the men of rank, the titled dames, and the high-born damsels who ruled the world of fashion and gave a tone and impress to the *mind* of the upper classes!

But, as it will hereafter become our pleasing duty to show, the millions adopted a far different line of conduct when the period arrived for pronouncing an opinion between the Prince and the Princess;—and on *that* occasion, as on *all others*, did the honest, intelligent, and generous-hearted working classes of these islands adopt the cause of the weak against the strong—of the oppressed against the oppressor—of right against wrong—and of justice against tyranny!

In the meantime we must not anticipate any portion of those important, interesting, and tremendous events which we shall be called upon to chronicle: let us therefore at once resume the thread of our narrative in its proper place.

The festival was over—the drawing-rooms were deserted—the banquetting-table was abandoned—the valets were extinguishing the lights—and the last carriage was bearing away the latest guests from St. James's Palace. The clocks of the metropolis were proclaiming the hour of *one*: the King and Queen had repaired to Buckingham Palace;—and the Prince of Wales was bearing home his bride to Carlton House!

CHAPTER CLXXX.

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER.

On arriving at the princely mansion, the heir-apparent handed Caroline from the carriage and conducted her through the hall, amidst the ranks of bowing domestics—up the grand staircase—to the principal drawing-room. Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who had followed from St. James's Palace in another carriage, were now in close attendance on the Princess; and after remaining for a few minutes in conversation in the drawing-room, those ladies conducted her Royal Highness away to the bridal chamber.

The instant he found himself alone, the Prince advanced hurriedly towards a table covered with refreshments—filled a large tumbler to the very brim with Port wine—and drank off the potent fluid at a draught. Then flinging himself upon a sofa, he gave way to his reflections.

But these were of no pleasurable character: and indeed his Royal Highness had many real sources of annoyance, in addition to the imaginary ones which the morbid condition of his mind had conjured up. In the first place, although the Prime Minister had consented to demand of Parliament a grant adequate to meet the liabilities of the Prince, he had insisted upon having a schedule of all his debts,—not a mere list of creditors' names and amounts due—but a detailed and business-like balance-sheet, showing for what purposes money had been raised—at what rates of interest the loans had been taken up—and the precise amount of consideration received for all bonds, bills, or other securities then in the market. Now it happened that many of these debts were either of so delicate a nature, or else were accompanied with such circumstances, that he could not possibly enter them in the schedule demanded. In that category was the sum he owed to the Marquis de Saint Croix; for the fact of his having taken the money of an unfortunate refugee as a *trust*, and then withheld repayment when it was solicited, would be regarded by the nation as a transaction of the most disgraceful character. And yet within the last three days the Marquis had been more than ever pressing for his money; and the Prince doubted not but that the Amazon was vindictively urging the Frenchman to be thus peremptory.

These portions of the royal debts which were associated with "delicate circumstances," were consequently no mean sources of annoyance to the Prince. Then, again, he had lately received a letter from Pauline Clarendon which contained an announcement that stirred up remorseful feelings in his breast,—the announcement that her sister Octavia was beyond all doubt in the way to become a mother!

In addition to those subjects for meditation, there was his marriage with a being against whom he had conceived a strong aversion;—and a presentiment of great evil, as yet unborn, but which would inevitably arise from this ill-assorted union, unfolded its dark and ominous wings overshadowingly upon his soul.

Therefore, during the half-hour which elapsed while he thus remained alone, he paid frequent visits to the side-table and poured the wine down his throat just as if it were water. The consequence was that his countenance acquired a ruddier glow—his eyes became bloodshot—the flesh forming their sockets grew swollen and inflamed—and his step was more unsteady with each journey he made between the sofa and the refreshment-table.

At length the door opened—and the Countess of Jersey made her appearance.

A glance at the Prince showed her the condition he was in: she saw that he was three parts intoxicated—and a smile of triumph for an instant shone upon her lips. But the next moment it changed into an expression of the most winning sweetness as she bent her lustrous, beaming, velvet-black eyes upon the drunken voluptuary whose swinish condition was only calculated to inspire disgust. She had however a certain part to perform—namely, to manage matters so that the newly-married couple should be mutually loathsome: and this part, which had been adopted by the Countess through motives of jealousy and envy towards her royal rival, was also encouraged by the Queen herself!

"The banquet of love is served up for my attendance, I suppose?" said his Royal Highness, with as much bitterness as a vacant manner and a difficulty of articulation would permit him to assume.

"The bridal chamber is in readiness for your reception, my well-beloved George," returned the Countess, placing herself by his side and taking his hand between both her own. "But you do not appear happy—and it cuts me to the soul to observe this downcast demeanour——"

"Frances, do you really love me?" demanded the Prince, abruptly.

"You know that I love you, George," replied the syren.

"Then pity me—pity me, my dearest friend," exclaimed the heir-apparent, who was becoming maudlin sentimental under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed.

"Oh! I do pity you, George—beloved George!" murmured the Countess, throwing her arms about his neck and covering his inflamed countenance with kisses. "But did I not tell you on the day of her arrival that *she* was no fitting wife for you?"

"The mischief was done—the evil was already consummated—and it was too late to retract," said the Prince, his speech interrupted with many a hiccup. "Six hundred thousand pounds of debts were not to be trifled with—they might have lost me the throne——But, perdition seize upon it!" he exclaimed with an almost savage abruptness: "fill me a tumbler of wine, Jersey—no paltry insignificant glass—but a good tumbler—and let me drown thought, and care, and everything that presses upon my mind."

The Countess hastened to perform the part of Hebe; and as she advanced to the refreshment table, the Prince followed all her movements with his eyes as if his lascivious looks could plunge beneath that rustling velvet which clothed her, and revel in the contemplation of all the charms concealed. Then as she returned towards him, with the brimming tumbler in her hand, he slowly and gloatingly surveyed the countenance that beamed with smiles—the bosom that was half exposed—the delicate hand that held the glass—and the beautiful feet and ankles that glancingly bore the graceful being over the thick carpet of the gorgeous saloon.

He took the wine—he kissed the hand that presented it—he drained the tumbler—and then he drew towards him the designing creature, the

effluent sensuousness of whose charms was stealing over him despite the emasculating effects of the deep potations in which he had indulged.

"You told me that you loved me, Frances?" he said, as he smoothed down her beauteous hair.

"I have told you so a thousand times, dear George," was the answer.

"Tell me, then, what I am to do," continued the Prince. "Shall I repair to the bridal chamber—or shall I at once let her Royal Highness understand that she is my wife only in name?"

"Oh! you must not carry matters to such a dangerous extreme as this," exclaimed the Countess. "Your treatment of her Royal Highness would get abroad—and the injury to your reputation would be irreparable. Come, my dear George," continued the artful woman,—"the time is passing rapidly—and it is now half-past two o'clock. Let me present you another glass of wine—and then to the nuptial chamber!"

"Be it so—be it so!" muttered the Prince, with subdued irritability of manner: then, after having drained the tumbler once more, he said, "And now, Frances, you must let me take your arm to—to—the door of—of—the bridal chamber: for my fee—ee—lings are overpow—ow—ering me."

Had his Royal Highness said that he was so drunk he could scarcely stand, he would have been nearer the mark: but a tipsy person seldom thinks that he is really intoxicated, and at all events is certain to assume any reason rather than the truth for his strangeness of conduct.

The Countess of Jersey supported the Prince as well as she was able: but he nearly dragged her down more than once as he staggered and stumbled along the passage leading to the nuptial apartment. Fortunately for his Royal Highness, there was no loitering dependant nor curious menial in the passage at the time;—and thus the beastly state of intoxication in which he was seeking the bridal chamber escaped the notice of any of the members of his household.

At length they reached that room which ought to have been made the sanctuary of love, but which a disgusting voluptuary was about to pollute with his presence. The conviction that he was *not* in a fit state to enter that chamber, appeared suddenly to flash to the mind of the Prince: and somewhat startled into sobriety, he pressed his hand to his brow—leant against the wall—and stared intently upon Lady Jersey's countenance for nearly a minute.

"My dear Frances," he muttered, in a faultering, hiccoughing tone, "I don't think—ink—that I'm altogether as I ought to be——"

"What *do* you fancy to be the matter with yourself, my dear George?" demanded the Countess, likewise speaking in an under-tone.

"I—I—begin to think—ink," stuttered his Royal Highness, with a look of hebetation and a stolid smile,—"that I'd much better go with you—to your room—oom—and pass the night—hic—in your—hic—arms."

"Much as I should rejoice, dear George, to have you as my companion," returned the Countess, her heart in reality heaving at the sickly vinous smell with which the royal voluptuary's breath was laden, "I must implore you to renounce the idea instantaneously. I have already told you that it would be ruinous——"

"True—true," muttered the Prince. "But I feel—eel—so—hic—so very queer."

"It is the excitement," remarked Lady Jersey, with a bewitching smile. "You have had a great deal to agitate you within the last few days."

"But don't you think, Frances—that is, I mean—hic—don't you really believe that I've taken a—hic—a leetle drop—just one glass—hic—too much?" said the Prince, his speech growing more broken and the power of sustaining himself upon his legs becoming every instant less effective.

"Do not entertain such notions, George," whispered the Countess, in a tone of tender remonstrance. "You are a little excited—but nothing more. Indeed, it is scarcely possible to perceive that you have been drinking anything at all."

"Are you sure, Frances?" asked the Prince, now really inclined to fancy himself sober, so sincere, frank, and ingenuous seemed the assurance which his patrician paramour gave him. "Well—if I'm sober, then, I'll make up my mind—hic—to—to——"

But here he swayed backward and forward in so alarming a manner, as he moved away from the wall against which he had been leaning, that he nearly fell headlong himself and brought the Countess down with him. She however exerted all her strength at the moment, and averted the disagreeable catastrophe: then, having received a few caresses which his Royal Highness thought fit to bestow upon her, Lady Jersey slowly opened the door of the nuptial chamber!

The Princess of Wales was reposing in the bridal bed. A soft and dreamy drowsiness had stolen gradually upon her when the Bed-Chamber Ladies had retired and she was left alone. It was not an actual slumber that steeped her senses in oblivion—but a partial somnolence which closed the eyes, lulled the physical energies into rest, and yet left the mind so far awake that the least incident would arouse it altogether.

The room was sumptuously furnished. Everything was new—and the most exquisite taste had superintended the appointments and decorations of that nuptial chamber. The cheeks of the Princess were slightly flushed;—and she looked really beautiful as she reposed in that bridal bed. There was a halo of innocence—a perfume of chastity about the fair sleeper, which would have ravished the heart of any man of honourable, generous, and delicate feeling.

Her moist red lips were slightly apart, revealing the pearls which lay beneath—those brilliant teeth that Lady Jersey had dared to decry! A soft dimple on the rounded chin gave an air of girlish sweetness to the whole countenance. One well-shaped arm, white as alabaster, lay outside the coverlid: the snowy night-dress, open in front, revealed the bosom rich in its glowing yet virgin contours.

The mellow lustre of the lamps in the bridal chamber gave just sufficient light and warmth to render the place a fitting sanctuary for love. The fire had died away in the grate; and the atmosphere was of a pleasant temperature. The curtains shaded the couch, save where the head of the Princess lay upon the luxurious pillow; and with the gentle and regular respiration to which her bosom rose and fell as if in long, measured, stifled sighs, the hue of the rose deepened or grew lighter upon her cheeks.

Suddenly a sound reached her ears—and she half started up in the couch. Her eyes were instinctively flung towards the door, upon the threshold of which she beheld her husband, the Prince of Wales. A deep blush instantaneously suffused her cheeks—and, with a natural modesty, she was about to veil her countenance behind the curtain, when it struck her all in a moment that she had caught a glimpse of *another* countenance in the door-way. An irresistible impulse caused the Princess to dart a second look in that direction ere she shrank behind the drapery of the couch;—and her eyes met those of the Countess of Jersey just at the moment as her ladyship was actually pushing the heir-apparent into the chamber. Then, at that instant,—transitory as was this meeting of their eyes,—it struck the Princess that the countenance of Lady Jersey wore an expression of fiendish triumph and diabolical joy that made *her* absolutely hideous for the instant, and carried a panic to the soul of the Princess.

As if experiencing the blow of a sudden consternation, the affrighted Caroline fell back upon the pillow—while a sensation at the heart and a bewilderment in the brain sent the influence of a prophetic warning thrillingly throughout her entire being.

At the same moment that she had thus recoiled as it were from the serpent-look which had been flung upon her from the threshold of the bridal-chamber, the door was closed and fastened *outside:* for Lady Jersey was resolved that neither one of the royal couple should have a chance of escaping from the companionship of the other, until it suited her purpose to allow such egress. Her object was to inspire them with a mutual disgust;—and as she tripped lightly away from the door which she had just closed, unto the chamber which had been provided for her in Carlton House, she smiled with an infernal malignity which for a moment made her beauteous countenance resemble that of a fallen angel entering upon the thresbold of hell!

Meantime the Prince felt himself suddenly abandoned to all the contingencies of a most awkward predicament, the instant that the door closed behind him. Again did he become slightly sobered—enough to receive and understand the conviction that he was in reality at an advanced stage of intoxication;—and, with that desperate energy which drunken men are sometimes enabled to call to their aid, he said to himself, "By God! I *must* appear sober, at all events!"

Assuming therefore as smiling and intelligent a look as he could possibly command, and steadying himself upon his legs with all his might and main, he advanced slowly and cautiously towards the couch with the intention of saying something flattering and conciliatory to his bride. For the thought now uppermost in his mind was, that he must in any case avert the ignominy, scandal, and shame of having his condition recognised by her Royal Highness.

But as he was traversing the room with a caution as gingerly as if he were proceeding along a tight-rope or walking upon eggs, he suddenly encountered a chair. All his ideas were thrown into confusion in a moment. Stopping short, he stood gazing at the chair in the strangest bewilderment. He strove to collect himself—he had sense enough to make this effort—but he could not immediately succeed. The chair bothered him: he could not make it out—and to his topsy-turvy brain it assumed an appearance as sinister and as ominous as that of the windmills to the fevered imagination of Cervantes' hero.

"Well, I'll be damned if I know who you are, or how the devil—hic—you came here," muttered the Prince at last, as he stood swaying to and fro in front of the high-backed crimson velvet chair which he thus inanely apostrophised.

These words,—the sound of which, and not the sense, alone reached the ears of the Princess—startled her from that consternation into which the look of the Countess of Jersey had thrown her: and now, suddenly recollecting that her husband was in the room, she was seized with a strange fluttering of the heart,—mingled emotions of pain and pleasure, alarm and hope, anxiety and suspense, thus agitating in her bosom.

"Oh! if he would love me," she thought within herself, "I would strive hard to love him in return—notwithstanding——"

But she could not allow the secret silent voice which was speaking in her soul, to finish the sentiment: for the image of the young, the handsome, the absent Bergami rose up in her mind, as if to warn her that she could *not* love another under any circumstances. Then again the reminiscence flashed to her brain that her husband was in the room: but she dared not move—scarcely breathe—much less draw back the curtain which separated him from her view.

"This is singular—damnation singular!" growled the Prince, after a pause of nearly a minute: then, plucking up a desperate spirit, he extended his arms towards the chair in order to ascertain *who* or *what* the object of his bewilderment really could be:—but overbalancing himself, he fell forward—upsetting the chair, and rolling ignominiously upon the carpet.

The Princess now gave vent to an ejaculation of alarm—started up—and drew back the curtain. She perceived her royal husband making desperate attempts to regain his legs: but it did not for an instant strike her that he was overcome by liquor. Her immediate and very natural impression was that he had fallen accidentally and had received some serious injury which prevented him from rising. The natural modesty of her sex forbade her from hastening forth to his assistance—for, though his wife according to ecclesiastical ceremony, she was as yet virgin of his embrace;—and still it became more and more evident to her that the Prince could not recover his legs unaided.

"Oh! what can I do?—shall I ring the bell?" she exclaimed, clutching at the cord of silk and gold which hung within reach.

"No—no—I—I'm all right—hic!" stammered forth the Prince, as he renewed his desperate attempts to raise himself up by means of the overturned chair.

"But you are injured—seriously injured, I fear," said the kind-hearted Caroline, as far as ever from suspecting the real condition of the bridegroom.

"Don't be—hic—uneasy," faultered his Royal Highness, getting up as far as a kneeling posture. "I'm overcome by—hic—my fee—ee—lings——"

And as he spoke he made another tremendous effort to recover his legs. It was completely successful: but the impetus given to his locomotive inclination, sent him staggering on for a few paces—and a heavy lurch brought him in violent contact with the bed. He had sense enough at the time to feel that he would give worlds to be enabled to save

himself: but he could not—and in this manner was he precipitated as it were, by his own unmanageable condition, upon the bosom of the bride!

Caroline was now more seriously alarmed than before. She had too much keenness of perception to fancy for a single instant that her royal husband had flung himself into her arms in obedience to the rapture of an enthusiastic affection;—and she could no longer believe that he was hurt by his fall over the chair, it being pretty evident that he had no broken limbs. Her ideas and conjectures being thus suddenly diverted into another channel, the thought flashed to her mind that the Prince must be overcome by liquor rather than by his feelings;—and as at that very instant he raised his head from her bosom, where it had remained pillowed for half a minute, a whiff of his vinous breath blew upon her face.

An inexpressible sensation of loathing seized upon the unfortunate lady—her heart heaved against the disgusting beast who was now endeavouring to sooth her with his caresses—and her very soul revolted against the idea of a closer and more intimate contact with her swinish bridegroom. With a natural impulse, therefore, she pushed him away—at the same time that she burst into a flood of tears. The royal voluptuary rolled once more upon the carpet; and the bride, burying her head in the pillow of the nuptial couch, gave way to that outpouring of grief which it was impossible for her to control!

Merciful God! was this the first gentleman in Europe—the most polished Prince in all the world? It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet-de-chambre: it has likewise been said that if our forefathers were taken off their stilts, they would appear very despicable beings indeed. And most assuredly are these assertions correct;—and it may be safely added that if Royalty be only seen in its privacy—stripped of the pomp which invests it with a false grandeur and the frippery which supplies it with an adventitious brilliancy—it will in ninety-nine instances out of a hundred sink below the level of pity and merit only contempt. Such would have been the case with George Prince of Wales, even in his sober moments: but when we behold him reduced to the filthy condition in which he dared to seek the chamber of his innocent virgin bride, we can only observe that it needed but this one act of cowardly brutality to crown all the infamy of his antecedent career.

Hours passed—the lamps had burned out—the morning had dawned some time—but the thick window-curtains excluded the light from the nuptial chamber. The Prince awoke—and the first sensation which he experienced was that of an icy chill all over. He stretched out his arms: one hand encountered the bed-post—the other a chair overturned. Strange and alarming recollections began to dawn in upon his brain;—and the racking headache which he felt was no insignificant evidence of their truth. A deeper and more searching chill than that which he had previously experienced, penetrated into his very heart's core as the damning conviction settled in his mind that he had been steeped to the very eyes in ebriety on the previous night. And if there were any doubt still remaining upon this point, it was speedily dissipated by the ignominious certainty that his Royal Highness was lying upon the carpet by the side of the nuptial couch!

Yes—he had fallen asleep where he had last tumbled down;—and the morning air had imparted to his whole frame that chill which he experienced upon awaking. Loathing himself—loathing his bride — loathing the whole world, the wretched Prince rose as noiselessly as he could from the floor; and, leaning over the couch, he listened in breathless silence. The low respiration which met his ear reassured him on one point: the Princess was sleeping *there!* She had not quitted the chamber in disgust—she had not abandoned him in mingled indignation and loathing: it was therefore yet possible to rescue the adventures of the bridal night from exposure and himself from the consequent ridicule, disgrace, and infamy.

Somewhat consoled by this reflection, the Prince groped his way to the window and drew aside the curtains. The golden lustre of day now streamed into the nuptial chamber; and his Royal Highness ventured to look at himself in the mirror standing upon the toilette-table. Ah! well might he shrink back with deeper loathing than ever: for, behold! the frill of his shirt, the white silk waistcoat, and the lappels of the exquisitely-cut dress-coat which he wore, were all stained and incrusted with the contents of his stomach, vomited during his sleep!

Hastily tearing off the offensive garments and slipping on an elegant dressing-gown, the Prince approached the couch. Caroline was sleeping upon a pillow still wet with the tears of burning anguish which she had shed. Slumber had fallen upon her through the sheer exhaustion of her physical and mental energies;—and the sobbings, in the midst of which the unhappy Princess had sunk into sleep, continued to break her respiration at short intervals. There was an expression of sadness upon her countenance—and it was easy to perceive that the thoughts which now filled her mind in the form of a dream, were of a profoundly infelicitous character.

While the heir-apparent was yet gazing upon her and wondering what would be the result of the outrageous brutality involved in his conduct of the past night, the Princess of Wales awoke with a sudden start—and her eyes instantaneously met those of her husband!

CHAPTER CLXXXI.

THE MORNING AFTER THE BRIDAL NIGHT.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales could not possibly feel otherwise than overwhelmed with confusion. The waking-up had been so sudden that he had no time to slip away from the side of the bed ere his looks encountered those of the Princess.

Then to his mind flashed the conviction,—rapid as the glance of lightning athwart the sky,—that whatever might be his sentiments towards his bride—however deeply he loathed and abhorred this marriage into which circumstances had forced him,—he nevertheless had no right to treat that inoffensive and innocent woman with the most cowardly indignity and the most scandalous outrage.

Moreover, he felt all the littleness and all the degradation of the position in which he had placed himself. A man does not chose to have his pride wounded even in the presence of one whom he either

hates or for whom he entertains the most contemptuous indifference: but the annoyance is far greater when the humiliation is self-inflicted. The Prince knew that Caroline had seen him in the most disgusting and repulsive phase of his character,—had seen him in the swinish loathsomeness of a drunken debauchee,—had seen him in a state when he might have given utterance to any language however filthy, or performed pranks however ridiculous. He therefore felt that he was stripped of all his dignity, alike as a Prince and as a Man, in her presence; and it was the most humiliating incident of his life—the most galling moment of his existence—when she suddenly awoke and lifted her eyes towards his countenance!

And what were the emotions—what were the feelings—what were the sentiments of the Princess herself? A burning blush suffused her cheeks—overspread her neck—descended to her bosom,—a blush of natural modesty mingled with indignation, when she beheld her husband standing by the bedside, and then at the same instant recollected the occurrences of the past night. But her anger was only transitory: the goodness of her disposition suddenly lulled it altogether, as oil subdues the fury of the waves;—and the thought flashed to her mind that her husband was *there* to offer his excuses for the state of ebriety in which he had sought the nuptial chamber a few hours previously. This sentiment on her part was quite natural: it was indeed a homage to the presumed refinement and vaunted polish of the Prince's character;—and *she* as a lady judged *him* as a gentleman.

Then was it that the true generosity of her disposition shone forth in all its amiable artlessness—in all its ingenuous beauty—in all its unsophisticated innocence. She loved him not—and yet she felt for him: she entertained not the slightest particle of affection for him—and yet she could not bear to think that he should stand humiliated, abashed, and ashamed in her presence. Nay—she had even every possible motive to abhor and loath him: but her sentiments were all of that truly forgiving nature which characterised her sex in general and herself in particular.

O Woman! vile, degraded, and unworthy the name of Man must that individual be, who could treat thee with disrespect:—but worse, ten thousand times worse than the most savage brute or the most venomous reptile is he who could bear himself towards thee with a coward and a barbarian cruelty!

The countenance of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales expanded all in a moment into the sweetest smiles: the beneficence of paradise shed its illumination upon those fair features:—and, half raising herself in the nuptial couch, she extended her hand towards the heir-apparent, exclaiming in the softest music of her silver tones, "My lord—my husband—my Prince—if you mean an apology, I want none—will have none!"

Coldly did the royal barbarian take that hand, which he scarcely pressed even for a single instant: then, dropping it abruptly, and with a dogged sternness of countenance and severity of manner, he said, "I thank your Royal Highness for having made me sensible that you fully appreciate the enormity of my offence, but that you are generous enough to forgive it."

"Is it possible that I have done wrong?" cried the Princess, grieved and alarmed by the words and bearing of her husband.

"Since you do not choose to lay any specific charge against me, madam," responded the Prince, in the same strain of cold heartlessness, "it is not likely that I should level any accusation against you. But it would be as well, under existing circumstances, if we understood each other rightly on certain matters. I therefore crave the attention of your Royal Highness for a few minutes!"

And, putting back the curtain, the heir-apparent seated himself by the side of the couch,—while the Princess gazed upon him in mingled wonderment and dismay.

"You are aware, madam," resumed the unfeeling bridegroom, "that our union has been one of convention—and not of love;—one of policy—and not of affection. I do not expect that you could have entertained any regard for me, even though the most flattering representations had been made to you concerning my personal appearance, my manners, my intelligence, my disposition, and my conduct. At all events, I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that even if you had experienced any good feeling on my behalf, it could possibly have survived the incidents of the past night. On the other hand, I will frankly admit that I experience no tender sentiment towards yourself. That you may be worthy of the highest esteem, the most devoted friendship, and the most ardent love, I will not question for a single instant: but I beg you to remember that we frail and erring mortals have no control over our own inclinations. Let us, then, admit—mutually admit—that there exists no love between us—and that there never can exist any! By thus looking our position in the face, we at once grapple with a difficulty which, if we avoid it now, will only force itself upon our notice with a more crushing effect hereafter. The result of all this reasoning on my part, is to bring your mind to recognise the necessity of our coming to a prompt understanding with each other."

"And that understanding?" gasped the Princess inquiringly, as she still remained gazing in mingled astonishment and terror upon the husband who was thus addressing her in a style of deliberate, cold-blooded, and systematic heartlessness.

"Ah! that understanding," repeated his Royal Highness: "well—it is for me to be as explicit, as frank, and as candid as circumstances demand. Look you, madam—your position is somewhat altered by your elevation to the rank of a British Princess; and you will no doubt see ample reason to experience the liveliest gratitude at the change."

"Are you serious?—or is this a pure mockery?" demanded Caroline, her indignation now rising once more.

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the heir-apparent: "and, upon my soul! I wish to say nothing to wound your feelings. I even deplore the necessity which compels me thus to speak out. But what are the facts? The other day you were a comparatively unknown and obscure Princess, belonging to a petty German Court the name of which was not over familiar even to persons tolerably well versed in geographical knowledge. Now you are the Princess of Wales—your name is already written in the grand page of England's history. You have become the envy of myriads and myriads of high-born dames and titled

ladies;—and you will shine, if you choose, as the central star of the most splendid galaxy of rank, wealth, fashion, and aristocratic influence, upon the face of the earth. Surely, then, this is a position for which you may feel grateful: it is almost the highest to which human ambition could possibly aspire—and even *the higher one* will some day be yours also. Well, madam—you are now Princess of Wales—and in due time you may become Queen of England. Let all this suffice you. Content yourself with the brilliancy and the grandeur of this position—enjoy yourself as you will—be entirely your own mistress—and, in return, leave *me* to be as entirely my own master!"

The Princess Caroline fell back upon her pillow—covered her countenance with her hands—and strove to collect her thoughts. She seemed as if she were walking in a dream—or endeavouring to follow some object that was guiding her through a mist. Athwart the cloudy confusion of her ideas she fancied that she caught a scintillation of the Prince's real meaning: but she was too much bewildered to fix her mental gaze steadily upon it and assure herself that she did really comprehend its true nature.

"Do you understand me?" demanded his Royal Highness, after a long pause.

"No. You must explain yourself more fully," she replied, with the curtness of an intense agitation which she vainly struggled to subdue.

"I mean, then," resumed the heir-apparent, in a tone of vexation, "that *after* the honeymoon you will consent to exist as my wife only in name, and that you will not attempt the slightest interference with my pursuits or my pleasures."

"Ah! I can consent to *that*, provided that the repudiation be not public," said the Princess, her mind suddenly relieved from a cruel anxiety. "I thought, in the first instance, that you were about to propose a complete separation;—and I would retire from the world altogether—seek the profoundest solitude—or even fly from existence itself, rather than be divorced the very day after my marriage. For, alas! the world would put its own construction upon such an event——"

"We need not discuss that point, madam," interposed the heir-apparent,—"since I have assured you that I contemplate nothing of the sort. No: it is my wish, as much as it can be yours, that we should sustain the conventionalities of married life. In public you will receive from me the attention and respect due to a wife: in private you will tutor yourself to exercise all possible forbearance. Upon this understanding we may avoid an open rupture—we may even become friends——"

"It is for you to dictate, and for me to obey," said the Princess, in a tone of real and unaffected meekness.

"Ah! but what I want you to do, madam," cried the heir-apparent, "is to pledge yourself—solemnly pledge yourself—that you will keep your own counsel and make no confidants. You must not speak ill of me in the letters which you write home to Germany—nor when the King asks you from time to time whether you are happy—nor when you are in private and familiar discourse with my sisters—nor in any unguarded moment, amongst the ladies who will become your acquaintances——"

"Oh! I will keep everything treasured up in my own heart," exclaimed Caroline. "Have you any farther commands to give me?"

"Do you address that question to me in seriousness or in mockery?" cried the Prince, turning his looks completely upon the Princess, who had just withdrawn her hands from over her countenance.

"I know not why your Royal Highness should suspect me of duplicity, in language, in manner, or in thought," was the mild and gentle remonstrance. "I did not expect to win your love—but I did not despair of obtaining your confidence. To everything you *have* proposed, I assent: to everything you *may* propose, I shall likewise assent—provided that you do naught to disgrace me publicly. I have now nothing but my good intentions—my fair fame—and my own rectitude of conduct to enable me to secure the regard of the British people——"

"A fig for their regard!" ejaculated the Prince, contemptuously. "The British people are born to be the slaves of their Sovereigns—the serfs of their rulers—the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the high-born and great;—and so long as they remain quiet, we give them credit for loyalty. When they show any manifestation of discontent, we set the Attorney-General to work—and he soon sends the ringleaders to the gibbet or the hulks. If *that* won't do, then we treat the people with a few charges of cavalry—or may be a dose of cannon balls;—and when we have completely put them down, we proclaim to the world that the rebels have returned to their allegiance. That is the way we manage matters in this country;—and therefore you need not trouble yourself for a single moment about the people's regard. But, to return to the topic most interesting to ourselves," exclaimed his Royal Highness,—"do we now perfectly understand each other?"

"I at least understand the wishes that you have expressed," said Caroline; "and you have received the assurance of my readiness to comply with them."

"And you pledge yourself to implicit secrecy with regard to this compact?" observed the heir-apparent.

"I will make no pledge of so solemn a nature unless you give me one in return," said the Princess, after a few moments' pause, during which the natural dignity of her sex began to assert its empire.

"And what pledge do you demand?" inquired the Prince, somewhat startled by the sudden display of spirit on the part of her whom a moment before he had looked upon as a soft, silly fool easily modelled to his own will, and equally easy to be crushed altogether.

"I demand your most solemn and sacred promise that you will never inflict upon me any public disgrace, nor subject me to any humiliation which may become patent to the eyes of the world?"—and the Princess enunciated these terms in a more decided voice and with a more resolute manner than she had previously ventured to assume throughout this painful interview.

"I give you the pledge you require," said the heir-apparent: and he repeated the words in which she had expressed herself. "Now you will ratify your own portion of our compact with an equal solemnity?"

"Yes—unhesitatingly," replied the Princess. "I vow, then, to keep my own council—to make no

complaints either in writing or in speaking—and to attempt the exercise of no authority over you. Will that suffice?"

"You have fully comprehended my meaning," was the prompt reply. "During the usual period of what is vulgarly—and, I suppose, facetiously—called the honeymoon, I shall become the partner of your chamber: afterwards, I regain my liberty and act as my own master. And now you must permit me to observe that I am grateful for the readiness with which you have entered into my views and assented to my wishes. Nay, more—you must even permit me to apologise for my conduct of the past night;—and I can assure you that when the hour for retiring to rest shall again come round, I will not seek your chamber in a condition as repulsive to yourself as it is humiliating to me."

Thus speaking, the Prince of Wales rose from his seat—made a graceful bow—and retired into his dressing-room.

"And it is for this that I have become Princess of Wales?" murmured Caroline to herself, the instant that she was left alone. "Oh! that I had never consented to leave my native land—never allowed myself to be persuaded by my parents to accept the hand of a foreign Prince! But let me not repine: no—no," she said in a hoarse whisper, as she pressed her fingers to her throbbing brows; "let me not repine! Resignation—meekness—docility—and endurance will best become me now. Never, never was woman placed in a position so difficult. The least error—and I shall be lost! Oh! he already wishes to rid himself of me—and we have not yet been married a day! Would that I had some kind friend to counsel me—some disinterested monitor to guide me now!"

And as the unfortunate Princess covered her countenance with her fair hands, the tears trickled between her taper fingers.

Presently she heard the key turning in the outer door of the chamber: and, hastily wiping her eyes, she assumed as much composure as she could possibly summon to her aid. The next moment Lady Jersey entered the room; and with an air of profound respect, she approached the couch. A glance convinced her that only *one* person had lain in that nuptial bed; and *she* was still there. For an instant—a single instant—did a smile of triumph waver upon the lips of the Countess: but it was gone the very next moment—and Caroline observed it not.

"Good morning, dear Lady Jersey," said the Princess, replying with unaffected frankness to the ceremonial salutation with which the Countess greeted her. "Did you not revisit the chamber for a moment last night—or rather, at an early hour this morning?—I mean, when his Royal Highness——"

"According to the prescribed custom, may it please your Royal Highness," observed Lady Jersey, "I accompanied the illustrious bridegroom to the threshold——"

"And did you not regard me in a very peculiar manner?" demanded Caroline. "Now, unless I was dreaming at the moment, it struck me that there was a very angry expression upon your countenance; and this was wrong on your part,—inasmuch as I had already assured you that I am in no way jealous of your friendship with the Prince—and I had even made the same representation to him relative to yourself."

"Oh! your Royal Highness must not imagine for a moment," exclaimed Lady Jersey, her countenance becoming scarlet, "that I should dare to assume in your presence any other mien than that of the profoundest respect. When I accompanied his Royal Highness as far as the threshold of this chamber, I saw that you recognised me, and I saluted your Royal Highness with an inclination of the head—perhaps accompanied with a smile of the most respectful devotedness."

"Ah! then the light must have deceived me," said Caroline.

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness," observed the artful patrician lady. "I hope that when you know me better, you will learn to regard me as one of your sincerest and firmest friends."

"Is it possible that you will become my friend, Jersey?" exclaimed the Princess, as much delighted as astonished at the assurance.

"It would be the height of my ambition and the crowning of my happiness," was the immediate response. "But so long as your Royal Highness puts faith in the vile calumnies which are whispered concerning myself, and which have evidently reached your ears——"

"Calumnies!" ejaculated the Princess, in astonishment. "I have heard no calumnies relative to you."

"Then to what did your Royal Highness allude when you spoke so significantly of a presumed friendship between the Prince and myself?" inquired the Countess, now unfeignedly surprised in her turn.

"Oh! do you call those calumnies?" exclaimed the Princess. "I thought that you English ladies were too proud and happy at being the Prince's mistresses, to look upon the reports thereof as calumnies?"

The Countess once more blushed up to the eyes—and averted her head: but when she had somewhat recovered from her confusion, she threw a rapid, searching glance upon Caroline to read in her looks what was passing in her soul.

"Your Royal Highness has altogether mistaken *me* and been misled by those rumours which I more vehemently than ever denounce as calumnies," said Lady Jersey, convinced by Caroline's manner that she was altogether serious in her remarks and entertained not even the remotest idea of sarcastic allusion.

"Would you have me believe that you are not the Prince's mistress?" she demanded, surveying Lady Jersey with mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"Should I dare offer your Royal Highness the humble tribute of my most devoted friendship, if there were any impropriety of such a nature in my conduct?" said Lady Jersey, affecting the virtuous indignation of a woman outraged by a foul calumny. "No, your Royal Highness—I have been belied; and I implore you to believe that such is indeed the truth."

"I dare not doubt you, my dear Jersey," said Caroline: "you have no inducement to deceive me. I was prepared to like you even while imagining you to be the Prince's mistress: how much more shall I love you, now that I have been assured of the contrary? Give me your hand: henceforth we will be true and faithful friends to each other."

"Dear Princess—as amiable as you are beautiful!" murmured the false woman, pressing Caroline's hand

LADY JERSEY.

to her lips and pretending to be deeply affected. "Believe me when I declare that your Royal Highness will have no friend more devoted, more faithful, more loving than myself; and if you should deign to make me your confidant—because all great Princesses like you have confidants to whom they unbosom their secrets——"

"But suppose there are secrets which their husbands have enjoined them not to reveal?" interjected the artless Caroline.

"Then for that very reason they must be sure and act contrary to their husband's commands," was the audacious response which the Countess at once hazarded.

"And why so?" inquired the Princess, her air suddenly becoming pensive.

"Because the confidant in such a case will tell the Princess whether the husband's motive was a worthy one in enjoining the particular secret to be kept," said the Countess. "Husbands are not immaculate, even though they be princes;—and since your Royal Highness has deigned to distinguish me with your friendship, I am bound to give you honest, candid, and ingenuous counsel."

"Oh! heaven knows I require it badly enough!" exclaimed Caroline, clasping her hands fervently.

"Your Royal Highness will find no flatterer, but a truthful and plain-speaking confidant in me," returned the Countess: "that is to say," she immediately added, "if I am really to consider myself a confidant as well as a friend."

"Assuredly—most assuredly," observed the Princess, altogether thrown off her guard by the air of sincerity and well-intentioned frankness which the hypocritical woman was such an adept at assuming. "But whatever secrets I may reveal to you——"

"Will remain entombed in my own breast," added Lady Jersey. "Your Royal Highness must know that at the English Court, and likewise in a princely household such as this, there are invariably two par-

ties: one is the party for the King or Prince, as the case may be—and the other is the party for the Queen or Princess. There will consequently soon be two parties in Carlton House—and I am glad that the friendship vouchsafed to me by your Royal Highness has at once determined me which side to take."

"Then you will be as it were opposed to the Prince?" exclaimed Caroline, ingenuously.

"Not exactly opposed to him—because these parties are not precisely hostile to each other," explained Lady Jersey: "but they serve as camarillas or secret councils to each exalted personage. Nevertheless, even were I obliged to oppose the Prince in any sense of the term, I should not hesitate to do so provided I was consulting the veritable interests of your Royal Highness."

"Then, after all, the Prince is really no favourite of your's?" cried her Royal Highness.

"Far from it," responded Lady Jersey. "Do you wish me to be candid?"

"I do," said Caroline. "Speak openly—undisguisedly."

"Then must your Royal Highness now learn that I hate the Prince of Wales," answered the Countess, throwing an accent of deep and concentrated acerbity into her tone.

"You hate him!" repeated Caroline, in wonderment. "Then why did you accept a post about my person which would compel you to take up your residence beneath the roof of Carlton House?"

"Because I already loved *you* before I even saw you," was the immediate reply, delivered with such an air of affectionate sincerity that the Princess, naturally warm and enthusiastic, threw her arms round Lady Jersey's neck and covered her cheeks with kisses and with tears.

"But tell me wherefore you hate my royal husband?" inquired the confiding, unsuspecting Caroline when she had thus lavished the proofs of her gratitude and friendship upon the false woman who was thus successfully entangling her in the inextricable meshes of a profound duplicity.

"I hate the Prince of Wales," replied Lady Jersey, assuming the air of an outraged woman conscious of integrity,—"because he would have seduced me into that path which calumny represents me to be treading. O Princess!" exclaimed the accomplished hypocrite, throwing into her voice all the tremulousness and into her manner all the excitement of deep emotion; "I am innocent of any wrong—and yet *your husband* has caused me to be regarded as a faithless wife! Can I do otherwise than hate him?"

"Alas! alas! it is very sad," murmured Caroline, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "But I will endeavour to recompense you for the injury which you have thus sustained at the hands of him who is now my husband——"

"Your friendship and your confidence will amply reward me, dear Princess," hastily exclaimed the artful lady.

"And you shall have *both!*" rejoined Caroline, in a fervid tone. "Nevertheless," she continued, suddenly recollecting herself, "there were certain things which the Prince said to me just now and relative to which he exacted a solemn vow of secrecy——"

"Oh! is it possible that his Royal Highness should have commenced the work of coercion, intimidation, or tyranny with you?" exclaimed Lady Jersey, affecting the deepest sorrow and surprise. "Alas! poor Princess——But you will pardon me——"

"Pardon you, dear Jersey!" ejaculated Caroline. "What have you done to offend me? You are speaking to me with the purest motives and in the kindest sense——"

"Yes, dear Princess," interrupted the treacherous woman, —"and you must repose implicit confidence in me—for I perceive that dangers are already overclouding the sky of your existence. It would be wrong,—nay—it would be folly—madness—to observe pledges extorted by menace, or to adhere to vows wrung from you at a moment when you exercised not a proper command over yourself. Besides, if you regard me in the light of a confidant—and as I shall retain inviolable all the communications you may impart to me—there can be no possible harm in your revealing the secrets to which you allude. You *must* consult me with regard to them—for I already perceive that they involve matters seriously affecting your happiness and your welfare:—but it is utterly impossible that I can tender any advice until I know all—everything without reserve——"

"You *shall* know all—everything," said Caroline, in a tone of decision: for she was now completely enmeshed in the toils which the duplicity and speciousness, the treachery and false friendship of Lady Jersey had been gradually yet surely weaving around her.

But scarcely was that promise of entire confidence given, when the door opened, and Mrs. Harvey Aston and Mrs. Harcourt entered the room.

"Not another word upon that subject *now*, dear Princess," said Lady Jersey, leaning forward over the bed and speaking in a low rapid whisper: "we will shortly seize an opportunity to converse at our leisure."

"Be it so, my dearest friend," responded Caroline, in the same subdued tone;—and the unsuspecting Princess felt her heart leap at the idea that she had secured the love, devotion, and fidelity of a woman whom she now looked upon as the most generous-hearted as well as the most calumniated of her sex!

Her Royal Highness now rose from the virgin nuptial couch, and submitted herself to the operations of the toilette.

CHAPTER CLXXXII.

THE EX-BAGMAN AT CARLTON HOUSE.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast, the Prince of Wales repaired to his own private apartment,—that splendidly-furnished chamber where we have already so often seen him, and with which the secret staircase communicated.

He wished to be alone—or at all events with no other companionship than his own thoughts: for he loathed himself—loathed his present position—loathed the whole world, in fine;—and he was precisely in one of those humours when the mind, bordering upon misauthropy, finds a sort of relief in solitude.

But his Royal Highness was not destined to be left long undisturbed: for Germain shortly made

his appearance with the announcement that a certain Mr. Page craved an audience upon matters which he alleged to be of some importance.

"Page — Page?" murmured the Prince, with mingled impatience and curiosity. "Surely I should know that name? What sort of a looking man is he, Germain?"

"About forty-five or forty-six, may it please your Royal Highness," was the reply: "thin countenance—angular features—sallow complexion—restless eyes——"

"The bagman, to be sure!" ejaculated the Prince. "I recollect the fellow now. But what can he want with me?"

"He says that he shall not detain your Royal Highness a minute," observed the French valet; "and that he can communicate something which it is advisable your Royal Highness should know."

"Well—I will see him," said the Prince, after a moment's consideration: then, so soon as Germain had quitted the apartment, he muttered to himself, "This man Page is a shrewd, cunning, and active kind of a fellow. I saw enough of him on two occasions to satisfy me of *that*. The first was the memorable adventure of the George and Blue Boar: the other was at Stamford Manor. But what on earth can he want with me?—and what can he have to communicate?"

Thus musing, the Prince paced the room; and in a few minutes the ex-bagman was introduced into the royal presence. Germain withdrew; and Mr. Page, who was attired in the most fashionable style, and whose appearance and manners combined the servility of a waiter at a Bond Street Hotel with the affected dandyism of a Burlington Arcade hair-dresser, confounded himself in bows and scrapings as he advanced towards the Prince.

"Well, Mr. Page, what do you want with me?" demanded his Royal Highness, impatiently.

"I cannot explain myself in a moment, great Prince," said the ex-bagman; "and your Royal Highness must bear with me. In fact, permit me to recover my breath, which the honour and pleasure of mounting all those marble steps have quite taken away."

And Mr. Page gave a couple of long gasps as he thus spoke.

"Now, then, perhaps you will enlighten me respecting the purport of your visit?" said the Prince, after waiting patiently—or rather with suppressed impatience—for upwards of a minute.

"I will come to the point in a moment, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed Page. "But I think I ought to observe, by way of preface—prologue—or introduction, that I am a man of sound discretion and consummate prudence,—seeing and hearing in reality everything that takes place around me—but ostensibly neither seeing nor hearing anything more than is precisely suitable——"

"I understand you, Mr. Page," observed the Prince, drily: "in fact, you are a man of the world—and that is saying everything."

"So it is, your Royal Highness—so it is!" exclaimed the bowing sycophant. "On the first occasion that I had the honour to come in contact with your Royal Highness, the adventure was ludicrous enough. I took your Royal Highness for Sir Richard Stamford, and chased your Royal Highness up the Edgeware Road——"

"Well, well, sir," cried the Prince, impatiently.

"Oh! your Royal Highness has since forgiven me for that affair," exclaimed Page. "You remember, great Prince—on the second occasion when I had the honour to meet your Royal Highness—at Stamford Manor—about six weeks ago—when your Royal Highness was accompanied by the beautiful and brilliant Duchess of Devonshire——"

"How, sir?—you discovered who that lady was?—you knew her, then, at the time?" ejaculated the Prince, angrily.

"Now do you give me credit for discretion, may it please your Royal Highness?" cried Mr. Page, in a manner humbly deprecatory of the royal wrath. "The circumstance has never passed the lips of either myself or Julia—that is to say, Mrs. Page——"

"Ah! and you knew that it was the Duchess—eh?" said the Prince, in a musing tone. "Well, you are certainly the most accomplished hypocrite and the most finished dissembler I ever encountered in all my life: for I could have sworn that you entertained not the faintest suspicion of who the lady really was. But, come, Mr. Page—be frank and candid, and we shall not continue the less friendly," said his Royal Highness, in a coaxing style: "did you actually know from the very first moment who she was?—or have you discovered the secret since?"

"Of what import can the explanation possibly be to your Royal Highness," demanded Page,—"seeing that I *do* know who the lady is—and that therefore it all comes to the same thing in the end?"

"It only matters thus far," responded the Prince, in a tone of mingled hauteur and contempt,—"that you seem to be beating about the bush a great deal; and I am therefore anxious to obtain an insight into what is passing in your mind, since you do not appear disposed to vouchsafe an explanation."

"Pardon me, great Prince," said Page, with a low bow: "I have no sinister purpose in view. If I alluded to past incidents, it was merely to convince your Royal Highness, upon the testimony which they furnish, that I am as keen as I am trustworthy—as sharp as I am prudent—as penetrating as I am wary. And if your Royal Highness were not to be thus made acquainted with my true character, you would wonder how on earth I could possibly come to know anything about the beautiful but unhappy Octavia Clarendon."

"Octavia Clarendon!" echoed the Prince, turning pale and staggering as if struck with a sudden pang at the heart: then, instantaneously recovering himself, as he saw the ex-bagman's keen eyes fixed searchingly upon him, he said in a tone of assumed indifference, "What have you to tell me concerning Miss Clarendon?"

"Not much—but still enough to render it necessary to be communicated to your Royal Highness," answered Mr. Page. "The long and short of the matter is that I have recently moved into a nice little house in the Edgeware Road—Paradise Villas the place is called——"

"Ah! that is where the Clarendons used to live," exclaimed the Prince.

"And where the two young ladies live *now*," rejoined Page.

"Indeed!" cried the heir-apparent, his heart bounding with joy at thus discovering the abode of Pauline. "Is it possible that the sisters have returned to their old residence?"

"It is so possible, may it please your Royal Highness," answered the sententious Mr. Page, "that I have seen them there with my own eyes—heard them with my own ears—and spoken to them with my own tongue. And what makes the thing more curious, is that Paradise Villas stand just at that part of the Edgeware Road where your Royal Highness disappeared so singularly from the yellow hackney-coach on the memorable night that I chased you under the impression of your being the Aylesbury baronet. But, ah! if the Miss Clarendons were living in Paradise Villas at the time," added Mr. Page, with a sly look, "I can now understand why your Royal Highness was visiting the neighbourhood that night, and where it was that you found a most pleasant refuge."

"And so the sisters have returned to their former home?" said the heir-apparent, in a musing strain—so that all the latter portion of the speech just delivered by Mr. Page was completely lost upon his Royal Highness. "Ah! I can penetrate full easily into the motives of that sly puss, Miss Pauline," he continued to mutter to himself, as he walked to the window and then back to the fire-place, in front of which he resumed the lounging position he had just quitted: "she thought to escape me altogether—to throw me completely out of all possible calculations respecting her whereabouts! And upon my soul, it was exceedingly managed! No one would have thought of looking for her in her former home. Well, my good fellow," said the Prince aloud, once more turning to Mr. Page, "and what have you got to communicate to me relative to these Miss Clarendons?"

"Your Royal Highness must be informed in the first instance," replied the ex-bagman, "that I happen to have taken a house next door to those young ladies. Now if I have a failing of my own, it is that I am inquisitive: and if I have the bump of perseverance, it assuredly is justified by the unweariedness with which I pursue any particular object that interests me. Well, the very day I entered my new house—accompanied by Mrs. Page, be it understood—I inquired who were my next-door neighbours. The answers were soon given. On my right hand dwelt the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby, lately removed from Jermyn Street, as I understood: and on my left hand were the Misses Clarendon. Well, may it please your Royal Highness, I soon discovered that my neighbour Sneaksby is a canting humbug—saving your Royal Highness's presence—who gets drunk with a red-faced hypocrite called Paxwax, and who keeps a very pretty servant-girl named Ann Jones——"

"Well—but it is about the Miss Clarendons that you wish to speak to me, I fancied?" interjected the Prince, who could scarcely prevent himself from knocking Mr. Page down, so great was his impatience, and so wearied was he of the ex-bagman's circumlocutory style.

"To be sure it is," cried Page, with as much self-possession as if he had never deviated for a single moment from the point. "In the same manner that I gleaned within a few hours as much as there was to know respecting Mr. Sneaksby, did I ascertain as much as it was possible to discover about the two beautiful sisters dwelling on my left hand. So I learnt that they were the daughters of Lord Holderness, who has very recently married again—that the elder, Miss Octavia, was not altogether right in her mind—that the younger, Miss Pauline, was like an angel to her unfortunate sister—and that they lived in the strictest seclusion, going nowhere and seeing no one. Well, most illustrious Prince," continued Mr. Page, "I felt particularly anxious to see these girls—and sure enough, in the evening, they went out into the little bit of a garden behind the house. Both were beautiful: but one was pale and had a sad melancholy look—while the other watched her with an earnestness of devotion that actually raised pious thoughts in my mind and made my eyes dim for a moment as if I was half inclined to weep. However—be that as it may—there was no difficulty in discovering which was Octavia, and which was Pauline. I went out into my own garden—the gardens at the back of these villas are only separated by a frail iron railing, bordered on each side by low evergreens; and thus it was easy for me to introduce myself in a neighbourly fashion to the sisters. Besides, I am not a man to stick at trifles when once bent upon a particular object;—and, I don't know how it was, but some strange sentiment of curiosity rivetted my interest upon those young ladies. I accordingly made them a low and most deferential salutation, and passed a comment upon the beauty of the evening. Octavia took no notice of me—she was plunged in the moodiest abstraction: but Pauline answered me with courtesy, though by no means in a manner which gave any encouragement for a prolongation of the discourse. But, Lord bless your Royal Highness! I am not the man to take hints when I don't choose: so I just pushed the conversation far enough to show the young lady that I wanted to get on a neighbourly sort of footing—and then I bade her good night. Well, next evening, I was out in my garden again—and we conversed a little longer. Miss Pauline was not quite so distant—and she could be a sweet amiable girl if she chose! I am sure of *that!*"

"No doubt of it," exclaimed the Prince: "but pray come to the point, and tell me in which way and to what extent all these circumstances are of importance to me."

"I shall have finished my explanations in a few minutes, may it please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page: "and in order to get as near the end as possible, I will at once observe that after two or three evenings of neighbourly chit-chat from one garden to the other, I ventured to introduce my wife—that is to say, the accomplished and well-looking Mrs. Page whom your Royal Highness saw at Stamford Manor——"

"I recollect perfectly," interrupted the Prince, with ill-concealed impatience. "Pray proceed. You were saying that you introduced Mrs. Page to the two young ladies——"

"Such was the fact," resumed the ex-bagman. "But the Hon. Miss Octavia Clarendon took little or no notice of my good lady—whereas the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon appeared rather pleased at the prospect of having some female companionship. And now I must inform your Royal Highness that this introduction of which I am speaking took place on the evening of the 5th instant—to-day, you know, is the 9th——"

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the Prince. "You say that the occurrence of which you are speaking took place on the 5th?" he added, more than half suspecting what was coming.

"It was so, may it please your Royal Highness," continued Page. "And just figure to yourself that me and my wife were standing on the steps leading down from the back-door of *our* house into *our* garden—while Miss Octavia and Miss Pauline were standing a few yards distant, in the gravel-walk of *their* garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm; and the setting sun was shining upon the auburn hair of the former and the splendid brown tresses of the latter. I thought to myself that I had never, never seen two such beautiful creatures in all my life! Well, I presented Mrs. Page to them—and, while Octavia stood gazing abstractedly upon a withering rose-bush, Pauline said some civil things to my wife. In fact, that charming Pauline is quite the lady! At first the conversation was naturally and necessarily upon ordinary topics: but all on a sudden, as the thought flashed to my wife's head, she exclaimed, '*By the bye, the young German Princess that the Prince of Wales is to marry, has arrived in London to-day—so the milk-man told me just now.*'—Oh! never, never," continued Mr. Page, his air becoming all in a moment solemnly serious, "shall I forget the effect which those words produced upon Miss Octavia. A half-stifled cry burst from her lips—a deadly pallor come over her—she stared with awful wildness upon my wife—and then sank back, with a low moan, into the arms of Pauline, who had suddenly become almost as excited as herself. Well, what else could I and Mrs. Page do under such circumstances, except what we did do?—and this was to scramble through the evergreens—over the low railings—into the next garden—and bestow all our attentions on the two charming young ladies. Pauline besought us to retire and leave to herself the management of her sister: but I gave Mrs. Page a significant wink—and she accordingly said that she would not for worlds leave the dear creatures in such a plight. So we half carried, half led the Hon. Miss Octavia into the house—the Hon. Miss Pauline assisting us as well as she was able. We placed Octavia on the sofa in the parlour—which, by the bye, is most elegantly furnished——"

"Pause not to touch upon trifles," said the Prince, in a low voice and with half-averted countenance: "but endeavour to adhere to the thread of your narrative."

"Well, please your Royal Highness," continued Mr. Page, "a most interesting scene then ensued. There was Miss Octavia raving after '*her dear Prince*'—'*her beloved Prince*'—'*her handsome George*'——your Royal Highness will pardon me—the words are her's not mine——"

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the heir-apparent, impatiently.

"All kinds of tender names did she bestow upon your Royal Highness," resumed Mr. Page; "while I and my wife were perfectly astounded at the discovery which this scene of course revealed to our comprehension. And Pauline—poor Pauline—was too much occupied in her almost wild, distracted, and despairing endeavours to appease and tranquillise her unhappy sister,—she was too much engaged, I say, in the task of soothing that frenzied mind, to take any farther notice of our presence. Thus we gleaned the whole truth from poor Octavia's ravings: for the wretched young lady called you '*her betrayer*'—'*her seducer*'—'*the author of her ruin*'—'*the father of her as yet unborn babe*'——"

"She said all *that*—did she?" murmured the Prince, in a tone that was scarcely audible: for never, never, in all his life, had he experienced the power of compunction so profoundly, so acutely as at this moment.

"She mingled the tenderest with the harshest names—the most loving epithets with the bitterest accusations," replied Page. "At one moment she invoked vengeance upon your head—at another she expressed her conviction that you would not deceive her: and finally she sank off, through sheer exhaustion, into a deep slumber, with your name hovering tenderly upon her lips. Then Pauline appeared to become aware, for the first time during this lamentable scene, that my wife and myself must have learnt her sister's secret: and, taking us both by the hand, she said, while tears streamed down her cheeks, '*Accident has made you acquainted with my poor sister's misfortune: I conjure you not to betray your knowledge of the cause of her sorrows!*'—Your Royal Highness does not require to be informed that we gave a reassuring answer; and taking leave of poor Pauline, who was overwhelmed with grief, we returned into our own house to discuss all we had seen and heard."

"Have you anything more to communicate to me, Mr. Page?" inquired the Prince.

"To be sure!" ejaculated that mercurially brisk and bustling individual. "I am now coming to the very cream of the whole matter—the point relative to which it is most imperatively necessary for your Royal Highness to be duly warned——"

"Warned?" echoed the heir-apparent, recovering somewhat of his dignified hauteur and casting an almost stern glance upon the ex-bagman. "What danger, sir, can possibiy threaten me from *that* quarter? If I made Miss Clarendon my mistress, I also made her father a Peer," he continued, the evanescent remorse which had been excited in his soul now rapidly losing its tensity and indeed relapsing into the cold heartlessness that was habitual with him. "But continue, sir, the observations you have to make."

"I shall not detain your Royal Highness much longer," resumed Mr. Page, now for the first time entertaining a fear that he was a little too prolix. "The incident which I have just related occurred on the 5th: the 6th passed without the young ladies re-appearing in the garden—but I sent my wife to make inquiries. She only saw the servant; and the answer was that Miss Octavia continued poorly, and that Miss Pauline was unable to leave her. The same on the 7th. But on the 8th—which was yesterday, may it please your Royal Highness——"

"I recollect the date well," cried the Prince, in an irrepressible paroxysm of bitterness as he thought of his wedding-day. "Go on, Mr. Page: what occurred yesterday?" he demanded, in a more conciliatory tone.

"It was last evening, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed the ex-bagman. "Soon after dusk, the two sisters went forth into their little garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm. Through the deepening gloom of the evening, the former resembled a drooping Muse breathing in gentle accents the history of her sorrows to the ear

of a sister-demigoddess. For she was speaking in the lowest tone—and yet with a continuousness which showed how earnest were her words;—and as I happened to be seated at the time in a little arbour of evergreens at the bottom of *my* garden, I did not think it necessary to disturb the poor young ladies by letting them know that I was near. I accordingly remained perfectly still;—and of course if I *did* overhear anything that passed between them, it was not my fault. Fancying themselves to be entirely alone, they were discoursing unreservedly, although in a very low voice. Octavia was declaring her resolve to proceed to Carlton House—demand an interview with your Royal Highness—and ascertain your intentions from your own lips. These views she enunciated in a strain which was so collected and rational, that I fancied she must have altogether recovered the full use of her reason. It was evident that Pauline entertained the same idea: for she began to argue with her sister just as one sane person addresses another. She represented the impropriety as well as the inutility of the proposed step: but Octavia was immoveably wedded to her design. The discussion was continued with a calm earnestness on both sides for upwards of a quarter of an hour; and not once during that interval did Octavia give the slightest proof of mental alienation. Nevertheless, she persevered in her resolve to seek an interview with your Royal Highness; and Pauline, evidently becoming alarmed at the determination to which her mind had settled down, and no doubt presuming too much upon its extreme apparent calmness, broke to her the truth—the tremendous truth—that your marriage with her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline was fixed to take place that very evening! Then, all in a moment, from the lips of Octavia burst the wildest of cries—and, turning abruptly away from her sister, she fled into the house, exclaiming, '*Give me my cloak—my bonnet—and let me depart to claim my husband, whom a foreign rival is taking away from me!*'—Your Royal Highness will forgive me if I thus unceremoniously and frankly repeat the very words which the poor creature uttered——"

"You need make no apology, Mr. Page," exclaimed the Prince, whose thoughts were now divided between compunctious feelings on behalf of Octavia and licentious hopes of possessing Pauline. "Pray continue—and hesitate not to tell me everything just as it occurred."

"The frenzied shriek of wildest anguish which thrilled from the lips of Octavia," resumed Page, "was echoed by one of the tensest alarm on the part of Pauline; and the whole neighbourhood would have been frightened out of its seven senses had not nearly every one gone into town to see the illuminations in honour of your Royal Highness's marriage. But my wife was at home—and I was in the arbour, as I have already explained: and while Mrs. Page was rushing down the steps in one direction, I was dashing through the evergreens in another. Over the iron railings once more—into our neighbours' garden we sped—and this time Miss Pauline was right glad of our presence: for poor Octavia had gone raving, raging, furiously mad—and it was as much as all three of us could do to hold her down. At one instant she threatened to lay violent hands upon herself—at another she —— But this may amount to treason——"

"Speak out, man—and fear nothing!" exclaimed the Prince. "I suppose she menaced *my* life as well as her own?"

"Just so, may it please your Royal Highness," responded Page.

"It does not please me at all," observed the Prince, for a moment suffering his features to relax into a smile at the oddness of that conjuncture of phrases. "But what was the result of this lamentable relapse on Miss Clarendon's part?"

"Me and my wife remained along with Miss Pauline until two o'clock this morning," replied Page; "and never shall I forget the awful paroxysms of anguish and outbursts of feeling which we were compelled to witness! And poor Miss Pauline herself——Ah! that young lady possesses an excellent heart——"

"And when you left Octavia at two this morning?" demanded the Prince abruptly.

"She had sunk into a profound sleep, through sheer exhaustion," was the answer: "but her last words were fraught with terrible menace towards your Royal Highness. And now, perhaps, the object of my intrusion upon the time and notice of your Royal Highness may be sufficiently understood, if not adequately explained——"

"You think that I entertain any fears of a poor maniac girl?" said the Prince, vainly endeavouring to conceal his uneasiness.

"I do not suppose that your Royal Highness apprehends actual violence," Page hastened to observe; "because I am well aware that Miss Octavia Clarendon, if she presented herself at Carlton House, would not be allowed to push her way further than the hall. But she might nevertheless create such a disturbance—proclaim so many disagreeable things——"

"Yes—*that* is indeed to be feared," exclaimed the Prince. "Of course her sister will not encourage her in this wild scheme of demanding an interview with me——"

"On the contrary. I have already assured your Royal Highness that Miss Pauline did everything she could to reason her sister out of the notion," said Mr. Page. "But what is she to do with a mad girl?"

"What would *you* do with her?" demanded the Prince, perceiving some sinister meaning in the look which the ex-bagman fixed upon him.

"I would have her locked up in a lunatic-asylum," was the prompt answer: and he looked harder and more significantly still at the heir-apparent.

"But do you really fancy that she is so *very* dangerous?" he inquired, with evident irresolution how to act.

"I am certain, great Prince," responded Page, "that the very first opportunity she has, Octavia will break away from her sister's care; and, under the inspiration of her frenzied ideas, she will not only seek Carlton House, but her history will be proclaimed to all who may be near enough to listen!"

"This must not take place, Mr. Page," said the Prince: then, after walking once or twice up and down the room, he suddenly stopped short within a yard of the ex-bagman, on whom he cast a look as if he meant to read him through and through.

"I am staunch—discreet—faithful," observed Page, perceiving and understanding that glance so penetrating and so searching.

"But will you take this business in hand?—will you guarantee to remove Octavia Clarendon to some place of security?" demanded the Prince.

"I will, your Royal Highness," was the answer.

"And your wife—is she as trustworthy as yourself?"

"There's not a pin's point between us in that respect."

"Then let her so insinuate herself into the confidence of Pauline—of Pauline, mind," observed the Prince, in a low deep tone,—"that the young maiden will learn to look upon her as a sincere friend in whom the most implicit trust is to be placed. Pauline must not know, therefore, that *you* have anything to do with the removal of Octavia——"

"Leave it all to me, illustrious Prince," ejaculated Page: "*both* affairs shall be managed to your satisfaction. I understand what your Royal Highness means with regard to Pauline. Well—it shows the exquisite taste of your Royal Highness ——In short, Pauline shall be yours," he added, with a resolute emphasis and a significant look.

"Good!—we understand each other," said the Prince. "And now let me hear your views relative to reward—for I scarcely think that a man in an easy position of life as you are, will be satisfied with mere lucre."

"Your Royal Highness has judged me accurately," exclaimed Mr. Page: then, after a little hesitation, he observed, "I presume that a few honours and titles—even so low as that of *Knight*—will be conferred shortly in commemoration of your Royal Highness's nuptials."

"Precisely so," returned the Prince, with difficulty subduing a violent inclination to burst out laughing in the ex-bagman's face. "Should you like to be a Knight, Mr. Page?"

"The distinction would just suit me to a nicety," was the complaisant response: "and I flatter myself that Mrs. P. would not disgrace it."

"Then let this understanding be established between us," exclaimed the Prince: "that when Octavia Clarendon shall have been placed in restraint and Pauline Clarendon delivered over to my arms, your shoulder is to receive the accolade of Knighthood."

"I shall soon win the honour thus graciously guaranteed by your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page.

He then made a low bow and took his departure, well pleased with the promise which had resulted from his visit to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CLXXXIII.

THE INVALID NOBLEMAN AND HIS UNKNOWN NURSE.

THE clock,—that clock with its chimes which had led Florimel to discover where he was,—had just begun to strike as the young nobleman awoke. He lay still to count the strokes of the harmonious bell:—and he reckoned twelve.

"Twelve!" he repeated in an under-tone. "But is it twelve at noon or twelve at night?" he asked, speaking to himself under the momentary impression that he was alone.

"Noon, my dearest Gabriel—high noon by the sun," was the immediate response murmuringly given in that well-known dulcet sound that proved so welcome to his ear: and at the same moment he felt her form leaning across his chest—her glowing cheek met his—and her mouth, rich in its moist lubricity, was pressed to his own lips.

"Noon, dearest—noon?" he repeated, so soon as he recovered the breath which that long luxurious kiss took away for upwards of a minute: "and have I slept, then, uninterruptedly since seven o'clock last evening?—and *that* too, after having lain ill for three days?"

"It is precisely because you were so very, very ill for those three days that a good long interval of slumber was necessary to restore your exhausted strength," answered the Unknown. "During that interval of three days you were sometimes raving in delirium—sometimes plunged into a trance whence I despaired of ever awaking you. You had received a violent blow, which produced concussion of the brain—but I will at once relieve you from any apprehension relative to the beauty of your countenance, my Gabriel, by assuring you that the wound on your forehead is comparatively slight and will leave no scar."

Thus speaking, in a voice full of concentrated tenderness, the Unknown again bent over the invalid and lavished upon him the softest, sweetest, and most delicious caresses,—but rather as a proof of love than to excite his passions at that moment.

"Thanks—a thousand thanks, for the tender interest you exhibit in my behalf," murmured Florimel. "And during those three days you have been my nurse?" he inquired, in a tone of deep feeling.

"I have scarcely ever left you for a single moment, Gabriel," was the soft and tremulous reply; "and had it not been for me, you would have slept with Death! Ah! it was cruel, cruel in the extreme on the part of Lady Bellenden to send you away from her house in a state of insensibility and without even summoning a surgeon to examine your ailment. But she is a prude—a veritable prude—one of your unfeeling sanctimonious ones, who would sooner be thought heartless altogether than too easy in making allowances for the follies, errors, and weaknesses of their fellow-creatures."

"Then the Marchioness thrust me ignominiously forth from her dwelling?" said Lord Florimel. "Well—I am free to confess that I deserved such treatment on her part: for it was assuredly a sovereign insult for me to enter her presence in female disguise——But perhaps you know nothing of the circumstances, my charmer?" exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly recollecting himself.

"What I did not glean from Lady Bellenden's servants, I could pretty well conjecture from beholding you in the disguise of a female," said the Unknown. "Thus it happened:—I was passing by Bellenden Priory in my barouche, when I saw at the gate a carriage which although a plain one, I instantaneously recognised as belonging to my friends the Desboroughs. Wishing to see the Countess of Desborough, I ordered my carriage to stop while I made inquiries whether it was her ladyship who was then paying a visit to the Priory. The domestics replied in the affirmative; and I was just alighting from my own carriage, when several

servants came forth from the gate, bearing amongst them what appeared to be the inanimate form of a female. The foremost domestic instantaneously cried out to the footman in attendance upon Lady Desborough's carriage, '*Here! you are to drive quick to Lord Florimel's, Piccadilly, and then return to fetch the Countess.*' — While thus speaking, the domestic opened the carriage door and was about to have you thrust ruthlessly in, all insensible as you were, when I sprang forward at the mention of your name. Yes—it was indeed you—*you*, my own handsome, well-beloved Gabriel! Reckless of what the servants might think, and not even pausing to reflect or ascertain whether they knew who you were or fancied you were really a lady, I claimed you as a cousin. *Cousin*, you know, applies to either sex; and so I could not be wrong. You were forthwith thrust into my carriage instead of Lady Desborough's—'twas all the work of an instant—and, with your dear head pillowed on my bosom, you were whirled hither in a state of continued unconsciousness. Now you know all, Gabriel —except that I have been very unhappy on your account," added the invisible but not impalpable syren, her voice sinking into accents of the tenderest pathos. "But, thank heaven! you are beyond all danger now—indeed you are convalescent—and I am truly happy once more!"

"Ah! my dearest friend—my kind-hearted, excellent, adorable nurse," exclaimed Florimel, as he drew the lady towards him,—"how deep is the debt of gratitude which I owe you! The proofs of sincere and disinterested affection which you have given me in this instance, have touched me profoundly — Oh! profoundly, profoundly," he added, with a deliberate emphasis, as he strained to his breast that glowing form which he had caught in his arms.

We need hardly repeat that the chamber was as dark as if there were no windows at all. The lady was standing by the bed-side: she was clad in a loose vesture—a mere morning wrapper negligently fastened at the waist with a band. Her feet were thrust into slippers: her hair was flowing dishevelled over her shoulders. Even in the midst of that utter darkness did a species of knowledge of her superb charms glimmer up intuitively, and expand into a thrilling conviction, in the soul of Lord Florimel, as he threw his arms around her neck and held her in a bending posture over him, with her bosom heaving against his chest, her cheek pillowed upon his own, and their lips meeting in frequent kisses.

Not that he could form any positive idea of the actual appearance of his unknown charmer—much less be enabled to recognise her should they meet hereafter in the public street: he knew not, for instance, the colour of her hair, the hue of her eyes, or the expression of her countenance;—and thus the principal indications, indeed the main guides, to the recognition of an individual were entirely wanting. But that she *was* handsome, he had no doubt: his hand had already, during their different interviews, passed a dozen times over her features and acquired the certainty that such was the fact. That she was splendidly formed, was even still more satisfactorily ascertained, — the sculptural richness, the fine contours, and the gentle inflections of the figure, being more easily traced by the sense of touch only, than the configuration of the countenance. Yes—assuredly she was handsome—gloriously handsome—and grandly formed, with Diana-like proportions!—and moreover, there emanated from her whole person, as it were, a perfume of love and an effluence of soft voluptuousness which intoxicated the sense, while the sauvity of her manner and the tender music of her voice stole with the engrossing power of an æsthetic rapture upon the spirit.

Ah! dangerous, dangerous woman: even in the cimmerian darkness wherewith she enveloped herself, but in the midst of which the imagination still depicted her glowing with light and brilliant as a goddess, did she exercise a power too well calculated to enslave the heart around which she cast her spells!

And as she lay thus half-reclining upon the breast of her noble young paramour, the thought gradually began to take birth and expand in his imagination, to the effect that such as this splendid Unknown seemed to be, the Marchioness of Bellenden doubtless must be. In a word, Florimel began to compare the charms which were now in such close and exciting contact relative to himself, with those which his fancy conjectured might be concealed beneath the widow's-weeds worn by the Marchioness. The Unknown was tall and slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, with a bust of the most voluptuous proportions: so was the Marchioness. The Unknown was assuredly possessed of splendid teeth: so was the Marchioness. Ah! but why does Florimel pause here?—why does the comparison, or rather the attempt at identification, abruptly stop? Because he is suddenly struck by the folly of attempting to push the task any farther, — inasmuch as although he knows the colour of Lady Bellenden's hair and eyes, the precise hue of her lips, the tint of her complexion, and the expression of her countenance,—yet he is utterly ignorant on all those points in respect to the Unknown!

And there were so many women of splendid forms, tall stature, and luxuriant charms, in the circle of his acquaintance, that because the Unknown was of that description of beauty, he might just as well identify her with the Duchess of Devonshire, or Mrs. Harvey Aston, or the Countess of Jersey, or even the Princess Sophia, or the Princess Amelia, or Lady Letitia Lade,—he might as well identify his Unknown with any one of these, we say, as with the Marchioness of Bellenden.

Besides, the hypothesis was contradicted by fifty other circumstances. Was it probable that a woman of the strictest seclusion and of eternal widowhood, was the visitress at masquerades?—was it possible that the serene, tranquil, and benevolent recluse was the lascivious divinity of that voluptuous boudoir?—could Lady Belleden entertain any serious notion of marrying him, if he were so inclined? — and how could she possibly exercise the slightest influence over that law-suit which threatened him with ruin? No—no: it was preposterous;—the attempt to identify the pure-minded, solitude-loving, even prudish Marchioness with the Unknown whose passions were so frenetic and whose conduct was so incomprehensible—such an attempt, we say, Lord Florimel suddenly abandoned as being ridiculous to a degree!

"I can guess what is passing in your mind, you silly fellow," whispered the Unknown, after a pause

of a few minutes; and her voice, soft and musical, was playfully bantering and full of good-humoured archness.

"Of what was I thinking, dearest?" inquired Florimel, now struck by the additional fact that the voice of his charmer was far more dulcet, more tender, and more harmonious than that of the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"You are seeking to establish my identity with some one of your female acquaintances," responded the Unknown: "you are racking your brain to discover whose personal appearance and attributes, *so far as you know them*, would exactly correspond with mine, *so far as you can form an idea of them*. Now am I not right, Gabriel?—and if right, is not this a little piece of treachery on your part—rendered less justifiable, too, by the devotedness with which I have tended you during your really dangerous illness?"

"Oh! pardon—pardon me, my invaluable friend!" exclaimed the young nobleman, touched to his very heart's core by the plaintive accents which her voice assumed as she gave utterance to those interrogative remonstrances. "I am unworthy of all the tenderness you have lavished upon me—all the love which you have shown so many times towards me! Yes—I confess that I was allowing my imagination to run riot into the realms of conjecture and seek to discover the mystery of your identification. It was indeed wrong—unworthy of myself—unjust, ungenerous, ungrateful towards you! But, Oh! can you be surprised—even though you may feel hurt and angry——"

"I am no longer hurt—and not for a moment was I angry, Gabriel," interrupted the lady, in her softest tones: and she silenced with the fondest kisses the reply he was about to make. "There—let us say no more upon the subject—unless it be that you will permit me to assure you how impossible it is for you to discover my secret until the

day and the hour shall come when I may choose to reveal it. It is a mystery which defies all your power of penetration, and which remains proof against all possible conjecture. *When* you are to see the veil torn aside—and *whether* you ever shall—depend entirely upon yourself. As my husband alone can you obtain the gratification of your curiosity in that respect: otherwise, the secret goes with me to the tomb! That I am worthy of becoming your wife, so far as beauty, accomplishments, social position, and fortune are concerned, I may assert without vanity: but whether—Oh! whether you entertain such misgivings relative to my moral character——"

And she lowered her voice until it was lost in the billing murmurs of the kisses which she lavished upon him and in which she thus purposely drowned it.

"My adored friend—my beauteous Unknown—my kind, generous, and affectionate nurse," exclaimed Florimel, wrapt in a perfect enthusiasm of devotedness and gratitude towards the woman who appeared to make him the idol of her own illimitable fondness,—"I once more demand your pardon for having, though merely in imagination, endeavoured to penetrate your secret. I love you—Oh! be assured that I love you; and I would sooner kill myself than cause you a moment's pain. Dear friend! how affectionate are your caresses—how tender your words towards me! How can I evince my gratitude for so much love on your part? Ah! I feel that sooner than seek to penetrate the mystery wherewith it suits thee to surround thyself, it would be worthier far were I to assist thee to the utmost of my power to maintain thy secret until the time shall come when thou may'st reveal it. Tell me, then, my charmer—tell me, my goddess of love in human shape—what can I do to satisfy thee of my gratitude?—what course can I adopt to deserve thy good opinion and merit thine unalterable friendship?"

"I will tell you, my Gabriel, what you must do to convince me of the sincerity of all that you have been telling me," said the syren-stranger, pressing still more closely to his bosom and his cheek as she thus bent over him; "you must leave London for a few weeks——"

"Leave London!" ejaculated the young nobleman, now vividly reminded of the fact that all his thoughts had recently been fixed on the discovery of Pauline's place of abode, and that the very disguise which had led to his present invalid condition had been assumed in order to assist him in the prosecution of that object.

"There!" ejaculated the Unknown, with an accent of vexation, and partially disengaging herself from his embrace: "I feared—I dreaded lest I should be asking too much! Oh! you have ties binding you to London—ties which are insuperable——"

"Be not offended with me, dearest!" exclaimed Florimel, folding her once more in his arms with an enthusiastic warmth—for the effluence of her charms and the fascinations of her language and manner stole upon him with a power against which he had neither the moral nor physical courage to offer any resistance.

"Oh! I am not offended with you, Gabriel!" she murmured, in a tone of the deepest pathos: "but I fear—I know—I am confident that you do not love me! You regard me only as an occasional playmate for voluptuous dalliance—the being who from time to time affords you a pleasing variety in your pursuit of amorous enjoyments! But, Oh! it is not thus that I wish to be loved—it is not in this light that I thought you could regard me!"

And Florimel felt his cheek become moist with the tears that fell from the lady's eyes as she still bent over him.

"Ah! wretch that I am thus to torture you!" he cried, no longer master of himself. "After all your goodness towards me, I am a demon of cruelty——"

"No—no: 'tis I who expect and exact too much," murmured the Unknown, in a voice tremulous with emotion. "We will separate, Gabriel—separate, never to meet again——"

"By heavens, this shall not be!" ejaculated the nobleman, whose feelings were worked up to such a pitch that he was prepared to make any sacrifice and consummate any deed of rashness or folly for the sake of the mysterious enchantress who had acquired and established such an immense influence over his soul. "Tell me what you demand of me, dearest one—and I swear to accomplish your wishes!" he cried, in a voice full of delirious fervour and wild enthusiasm.

"Ah! now you are my own dear, dear Gabriel once more," whispered the lady, bestowing upon him the tenderest caresses at the same time;—"and never, never shall you repent the proof of love and affection which you thus give me!"

"Henceforth you shall be all on earth to me, my invisible but cherished angel!" cried the infatuated young man. "Let us think not of the absurd shackles of marriage—but be you my mistress—the joy of my heart—bound to me by the tenderest of ties—as I shall remain bound to you by the same eternal bonds!"

"Oh! now you are dictating terms to me," exclaimed the lady, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, but the accents of which were full of fondness; "whereas 'tis for me to prescribe certain conditions to you—at least if the promises which you ere now made me be sincere——"

"Name your conditions, my well-beloved!" interrupted Florimel, his voice laden with the gush of enthusiastic feelings that poured forth from his soul as he strained the warm, glowing, palpitating form of that splendid creature more closely still to his own breast: "dictate your terms—and I swear by all that is sincerest, and sweetest, and holiest in the experience of love to obey you as if you were my guardian angel—the arbitress of my destinies! Say, then, what do you require of me? That I should leave London for a few weeks——"

"Yes—and that you should repair to some distant town—some pleasant watering-place, for instance—at which you must remain to ponder over all I have ever said to you, either on this occasion of our being together or when we met last——"

"Ah! you spoke to me *then* of many strange things," whispered Florimel.

"And strange things can I perform also, my well-beloved," responded the lady, accompanying the assurance with the tenderest caresses,—"if you will only place implicit confidence in me and act in accordance with my dictates. O Gabriel—dear Gabriel—I can save you—save you, if I choose, from you know not how much adversity!" she exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiasm suddenly gushing

forth with all the accents of a fervid and unmistakable sincerity.

"Command me — order me, as thou wilt, my guardian genius!—for such shall I henceforth consider thee—and such wilt thou become in respect to my destinies!" cried the infatuated young nobleman, growing each instant more and more enslaved to a despotism that was as delicious as it was incomprehensible: then, as if he suddenly felt all the folly of thus yielding himself up to an unknown tyrant, albeit the chains which she cast upon him were of silk and of flowers, he exclaimed, "Oh! whence is derived that power of fascination and of enchantment which thou hast learnt to wield over me with such irresistible success? 'Tis the effluence of a wondrous beauty the glory of which I am as yet only permitted to imagine, but in the voluptuousness of which I have revelled again and again! Oh! tell me then, adored one, what shall thy slave do to testify his devotion?—whither shall he repair?—when shall he take his departure from this great city?—and how long shall he remain away? Give me thy commands upon all these points, my guardian angel—my unknown goddess—my unseen divinity!—and thou shalt be obeyed to the very letter—aye, to the very letter, as I have a soul to be saved!"

"You solemnly—sacredly—inviolably swear to all *this?*" murmured the lady, in a tone of subdued ecstacy and triumph. "Let me feel you place your hand upon your heart and take the most serious of oaths to perform your promise."

"There!—now are you content, my angel?" asked Florimel, when he had done as he was directed.

"Yes—and I love you more—Oh! ten thousand times more than ever!" exclaimed the Unknown, embracing him with rapture. "The conditions I impose upon you, my Gabriel, are these:—that when night comes you suffer yourself to be placed in my carriage, which will take you to Dover, where you will fix your abode for a few weeks. You can thence write to your own mansion in Piccadilly, ordering such servants as you may choose to select for the purpose to follow you to that sea-port;—and there you will remain for six weeks without returning to the metropolis. Now, do you repent of the promise you have given me and the oath you have taken?"

"No—no—I do not repent!" exclaimed the infatuated young nobleman. "But shall I be compelled to live in solitude at Dover?—shall I not be enabled to press you in my arms during an interval which, without you, will seem long and tedious indeed?"

"Oh leave all that to me, my Gabriel!" returned the impassioned woman, straining him again and again to her heaving, glowing, throbbing bosom, and lavishing upon him those caresses which were so full of rapture, ecstacy, and voluptuousness. "You must ask me no more questions, Gabriel: but perhaps you will be better pleased with all that may take place than you can now possibly anticipate. Is our bargain complete?—is our compact settled?"

"It is—it is, my angel!" cried the young nobleman: "and thus—and thus—and thus do I ratify it," he added, accompanying each fervid ejaculation with as warm a kiss impressed upon the moist lips that sought his own.

We need not dwell longer upon this scene. Suffice it to say that the Unknown Lady remained with her infatuated paramour for another hour, until he sank off into a delicious slumber. She then rose from the arm-chair in which she had seated herself while he was sinking into that refreshing sleep that stole gradually upon him; and on quitting the room she carefully locked the door behind her, taking the key from the lock so that no one could possibly enter the chamber from without.

Then a profound silence reigned in that apartment,—a silence that was broken only by the low and regular respiration of the sleeping nobleman.

But gradually a slight rustling of the drapery hanging around the bed and sweeping the floor, broke gently and almost imperceptibly upon that stillness;—and some one crept with infinite caution from beneath the couch. Then the individual paused — listened — and held his breath, as if it were an inanimate spectre from the grave. The young nobleman continued to sleep on profoundly —uninterruptedly;—and the intruder, satisfied that this was the case, took a pair of scissors from his pocket, and cut off a small piece of the curtains surrounding the bed. He then felt his way in the same cautious, noiseless manner, towards the window; and from the hangings drawn so closely over the shutters, he cut another fragment with his scissors. Again he paused — again he listened — and he acquired the certainty that Lord Florimel was steeped in the Lethean sweets of a profound slumber.

The intruder now took from about his person several skeleton-keys, which he tried one after another in the lock of the door of the chamber. This proceeding he conducted with the same caution which he had hitherto observed—stopping frequently and holding his breath to listen whether the sleeping nobleman had been disturbed. But Florimel's slumber was proof against the low sounds of the keys grating in the lock; and at length the intruder succeeded in opening the door. He peeped forth: the coast was clear—and, carefully fastening the door behind him, he entered the passage, which was now lighted by the sun-beams that flowed through a window over the staircase. Descending that staircase, the intruder opened the door at the foot and entered the garden. Plunging into an avenue of evergreens, he passed rapidly and unobserved along the shaded walk towards the gate, whence he issued without encountering a soul to notice or question him.

When night came, Lord Florimel awoke to find the Unknown Lady seated in the arm-chair by his side; and, in the profound darkness of that chamber, but assisted by the hands of the syren, he put on the male apparel which her thoughtful care provided for him. This toilette was interrupted by many ardent caresses: but at length it was completed;—and, a bandage having been placed over Lord Florimel's eyes, he was led forth by his companion from the boudoir of love, and mystery, and darkness.

The stairs were descended — the garden was traversed — the gate was passed — and into the carriage which was waiting did Lord Florimel mount, still guided by the Unknown. Hasty farewells were whispered between them: the door was closed—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away.

For some minutes did the young nobleman remain plunged in the reflections which this new phase in his life was so well calculated to excite: then, taking off the bandage, he found, as he had

expected, that the blinds of the carriage were drawn up and immoveable. In another quarter of an hour the vehicle stopped; and the tall footman, opening the door, unfastened the blinds and lowered them. Florimel looked forth; and he at once recognised the neighbourhood where this halt took place—for the towers of Westminster Abbey were rearing their grey summits close by, in the pure moonbeams; and the arching rows of lamps marked with their tracery of glimmering light the curved viaduct of Westminster Bridge.

The operation of unfastening and lowering the blinds only occupied a couple of minutes; and as the bell of the Abbey proclaimed the hour of eleven, the carriage rolled rapidly along over the bridge.

"My God! what have I done?" murmured Florimel to himself, a sudden pang of remorse now inflicting upon his heart a torture like the stab of a poniard. "I have abandoned my Pauline—I have renounced that angel for a being whom I do not know! Alas! alas! I have been guilty of the most tremendous imprudence,—aye—and of the blackest perfidy towards Pauline!"

Then, covering his face with his hands, Lord Florimel remained for upwards of five minutes in the deepest reverie,—a reverie in which, though his body was as motionless as a statue, his mind was travelling along the beaten road of the past with the speed of a race-horse. All the enormous folly of which he had been guilty in surrendering himself up to the influence of the unknown syren, now developed itself with an effect too sombre to be positively startling—too darkly gloomy to be actually intense or thrilling: but a sorrow, profound as a consternation and black as despair, stole upon him—and he felt like a man who by one single false step has ruined a brilliant position or undermined a colossal fortune.

Vainly did he endeavour to console himself—or rather to justify his own treachery towards Pauline—by the reflection that she had of her own accord put an end to everything between them: again and again would recur the crushing and overwhelming conviction that, if he really loved her, it was his duty to persevere in finding her out and demanding an explanation of the past. Again and again, too, was the fact forced upon his contemplation that *she* loved him, and that her cruelty would not endure for ever. But now he had resigned her—resigned that being so beautiful and so charming: he had renounced her—and for the sake of a stranger!

These were the thoughts which now overhung his mind in the shape of the darkest, gloomiest, most sombre shadows;—and he longed to order the carriage to stop—that he might leap forth and retrace his way homeward as rapidly as he could. But why did he not do so?—why did he remain voiceless and motionless upon the downy cushion of that carriage? Because, as the reader has already seen on more occasions than one, he lacked that moral courage which could alone arouse him to the point of energy adequate to sustain an effectual struggle against the influences which were urging him on in his career of folly: and moreover the spell of the syren's fascinations was still upon him! All the mystery by which she was surrounded—the power which she asserted over his own fortunes, either to save them from destruction or precipitate their ruin—and then, the impression which her wanton disposition had produced upon his own ardent temperament,—together with the solemn promise which he had given to pay implicit obedience to her commands and obey her injunctions,—all these circumstances, combined with a burning curiosity to solve the enigma of which she was the charming but dangerous object, exercised upon the mind of the young nobleman an influence which clung to him like the poisoned garment of Dejanira every time he endeavoured to throw it off.

"No! I must accomplish my destiny—I must not essay any longer to battle against it!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud, as he withdrew his hands from his face and woke up from his painful reverie. "Whatever be the results, I must pursue this adventure to the end! The Unknown offers to save me from ruin if I will marry her. '*Make me your wife,*' she said, '*and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably destroy you in respect to fortune and despoil you of rank.*'—Well, she loves me: and perhaps I may yet induce her to save me, even without becoming her husband. Then, Pauline—my own sweet Pauline—I may find thee out, throw myself at thy feet, and make my peace with thee, my angel and my beauty!"

Thus mused Lord Forimel *now:* and therefore the carriage continued to be whirled along the Kentish Road without a word of counter-order from his lips!

CHAPTER CLXXXIV.

THE MANIACS.

A WEEK had elapsed since James Melmoth awoke to the consciousness that he was undergoing the treatment of a lunatic.

He was in a stone dungeon, with a massive arched roof, and so far open in front that instead of having any masonry on that side, it was separated by a stout iron grating from a long narrow passage. It therefore resembled the den of a wild beast. There were six of these places all in a row; and they were denominated the Mad-Cells.

In the middle of the iron gate set in the grating, was a small wicket about a foot square, and which was used for introducing the food of those prisoners who were too violent and dangerous for the keeper to enter their dens. Each cell contained an iron bedstead screwed down to the stone pavement; and the bedding was of the strongest and coarsest material. No table—no chair—no article of furniture, in fine, save the iron bed, appeared in either of those cells. The light was admitted from narrow windows in the wall of the passage; and in wintertime the place was warmed by means of a fire at the end of that stone corridor.

Such were the mad-cells of the old workhouse of which we are writing:—and it was in one of those accursed dens that James Melmoth had now been kept a prisoner for seven days.

The reader will remember that the unfortunate man had leapt from his couch in the infirmary to make an attack upon Mr. Thurston, and that he had fallen with a violence which deprived him of his senses. His restoration to life was followed by a terrible delirium in which he had given

utterance to the most awful ravings, and had acted in a manner compelling the surgeon to have him put under restraint. He was therefore lodged in one of the mad-cells; and hence it was that when he awoke to consciousness *he found himself held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress, and the sleeves of the jachet sewn to the sides of that garment itself.*

After long communing with himself, Melmoth was enabled to look his position clearly in the face. He saw that so long as he was considered to be a madman, there was no danger of his being handed over to the grasp of criminal justice for the violation of the churchyard—a horror from which his mind, in its calm and lucid moments, recoiled with inexpressible loathing. But if, on the other hand, his conduct afforded proof of a recovered sanity, he would assuredly be transferred from the mad-cell of the workhouse to the dungeon of a felon's gaol.

It was therefore necessary that he should at least simulate a mental alienation which had in reality ceased to exist. But then there was the consideration—how was he to get released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined? The task was a difficult one: for in order to accomplish his aims, he must affect just so much madness as would save him from being handed over to the criminal law, and yet he must exhibit a sufficient degree of tractability to induce the surgeon to emancipate him from the strait-jacket.

This was the astute policy upon which James Melmoth resolved;—and it succeeded so far that the medical attendant ordered him to be released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined. But still he remained a captive in that dreadful cell; and it was evident from the questions put to him by the keeper, the master of the workhouse, and the surgeon himself, that they more than half suspected his gloomy manner and eccentric observations to be the assumed semblance of madness. Moreover, Melmoth, who was ever on the alert to catch anything that fell from the lips of those authorities who visited him, overheard certain remarks between the surgeon and the keeper which convinced him that his duplicity was rapidly becoming more and more transparent; — and he shuddered every time a step approached his cell, for fear that the officers of justice were coming to bear him away to prison.

His state of mind was horrible in the extreme. In the neighbouring cells there were real maniacs,—men whose brain adversity had touched in the first instance, and whom the tyranny of the workhouse goaded to insanity altogether. The fiend-like yells —the demoniac cries—the appalling lamentations —the bitter weeping—the piteous moaning—and the frightful language, which exhibited the different phases of mental alienation on the part of those unhappy beings, rendered the day torturing to a degree and the night positively hideous. Melmoth, in fact, felt that if he were to remain long in such a shocking vicinage, he should really end by going mad himself.

And thus a week had passed;—and at the expiration of this time, the miserable man perceived that there were moments when his own brain was reeling—not under the influence of that appalling monomania which had driven him, even against his will, to the desecration of the churchyard,—but with another and different species of mental perturbation. His own wretched thoughts were poignant, and tense, and harrowing enough to drive him crazy: and when to their bitterness, and anguish, and despair, were superadded all the horrors of the maniac revels on his right and his left, the wonder was *not* that he should have felt his own brain gradually affected, but that the equilibrium of his reason should have survived even for a single day the awful shock of such tremendous influences!

Nevertheless, as we have stated, a week passed —and during this interval the poor wretch retained his reason so well that he was even enabled and compelled to *affect* madness in order to save himself from a doom more dreaded than his present condition. But he began to feel that this state of things could not possibly last: his assumed insanity was suspected, even while it was verging into the dire reality of the terrible affliction. What could he do?—to remain *there* was to court the condition of the raving lunatics who were writhing, yelling, roaring, weeping, and lamenting in the other cells: and to give up playing the part of an insane person, was to rush headlong into all the infamy and intolerable disgrace attendant upon a trial at the Old Bailey as a desecrator of the resting-places of the dead!

It was in the evening of the seventh day—the sun had set—and, as no lamp burnt in the stone passage, the mad-cells were all as dark as pitch. Melmoth was seated upon his bed, thinking of his dead wife whose corpse he had torn up from the grave—thinking of the care with which he had re-consigned it to the grave,—thinking also of his poor children whom he had last seen in the infirmary, but concerning whom he had not dared ask a single question since he had become an inmate of that barred den,—of all these subjects was he thinking, while the train of his ideas was interwoven with other threads of harrowing reminiscences, and while the yells and cries of the neighbouring maniacs were ringing like a thousand bells through his wildering brain.

Presently a light flashed in at the end of the passage—footsteps advanced—and Melmoth, anxious to escape those searching questions which the authorities of the place were wont to put to him in order to probe the real state of his mind, threw himself softly back upon the bed and pretended to be wrapped in a profound slumber.

"Now, then, hold your cussed tongues, you waggabones!" thundered the voice of the keeper, as he entered the passage, carrying a lantern in his hand.

Some of the maniacs became stupified with consternation all in a moment; and the voices of the rest fell to a lower key—yells and cries sinking into subdued moanings and half-stifled laments.

"This new order of the magistrates that I should visit the lunatics three times a-day, doesn't suit my book at all," growled the master of the workhouse, who, it appeared, was accompanying the keeper, and whose voice Melmoth had no difficulty in recognising. "It seems that there's going to be a regular clear-out of these mad fellows—and that they're all to go to the county asylum in the course of a few days."

"But what's going to be done with this here chap?" inquired the keeper as he and the master stopped at the grating of Melmoth's cell.

"Ah! that rests with the report which I and the surgeon may send in," responded the governor of the workhouse, in a lower tone than at first. "All confirmed cases of madness are to be packed off to the county asylum, thank God: but I don't know whether *this* is a confirmed case or not. What do *you* think?"

"I've already told you my opinion, sir," was the keeper's answer.

"You don't believe the fellow to be mad?" said the master interrogatively, but in a still more subdued voice than before.

"No—I'll be hanged if I do," returned the keeper, not troubling himself to moderate his usual loud and dictatorial manner of speaking.

"Hush!" murmured the master. "The poor devil sleeps——"

"Not he!" ejaculated the keeper, gruffly. "D'ye think, sir, I haven't seen enough of madness, both real and feigned, not to know which is which, arter having filled this sitivation for seventeen year, come next Janivary? Why, look at the wery position of the feller as he lies on his bed there: I'll be damned if it isn't all sham!"

"If I thought so—after all I've heard about him from our surgeon and a certain Mr. Thurston who was here t'other day when he went off into a fit," said the governor, in a half-musing tone, but speaking in a voice that was clearly audible not only to the keeper but likewise to Melmoth himself,—"I say that if I thought he really was playing any of his tricks, I'd devilish soon have him packed off to Newgate, I would—the monster!"

"Well, and you'll have to do it, sir—and to-morrow too," exclaimed the keeper, brutally: "for I'll take my davy the fellow is no more mad than I am."

"We will see about it," rejoined the master: then after a few moment's pause, he added, "All things considered, I shall take your advice and send in a report, to-morrow, to the effect that you recommend."

The governor and the keeper then withdrew, closing the door of the passage behind them;—and total darkness once more reigned in the place occupied by the mad-cells.

Yes—darkness, but not silence: for scarcely had the two officials retired, when the yells, screams, and other uncouth noises which were wont to make the night terrible there, burst forth again, and with redoubled horror. Starting from his bed—springing from it, as if he were a maddened lion—Melmoth dashed himself in desperation against the strong bars, which vibrated to the fury of the shock. He felt that he was going crazy: he was already crazed for the time being! Goaded to the wildest recklessness by his own dreadful thoughts—by the infernal din which raged like the revelry of hell around him—and by the terrible prospects opened up to his contemplation by the discourse which he had just overheard between the governor and the keeper,—Melmoth had lost all control over his actions.

Although his lips gave not utterance to a word, yet it seemed to him as if some inward voice were roaring out, "I am mad! I am mad!"—and, under the terrible influence of the demoniac spell which was upon him, he dashed himself upon the stone pavement—then against the bars—and then upon the bed, all the iron-work of which clanked as if chains were suddenly thrown down upon the floor. He was infuriate: his eyes gleamed in their bloodshot rage like those of a hyena;—and the foam oozed from his mouth.

Tremendous was the influence which this appalling wrath exercised all in a moment upon the maniac neighbours of the monster-man. The infection of his fury was caught by those kindred spirits already goaded to such a rabid extreme: two or three, whose limbs had been hitherto held powerless and motionless by the strait-jacket and the trowsers fastened to the mattress, burst from their bonds as giants would cast off the trammels of straws:—and the whole lunatic company began dashing themselves, each against the bars of his own cell—while the most appalling cries and yells thrilled through the very walls of massive stone.

In a few minutes the keeper burst into the passage to ascertain the cause of a disturbance more terrible than even it usually was, and which had reached his ears as he was traversing the yard that lay between the tenement containing the mad-cells and the main building. Seizing an enormous whip, he set his lantern upon a window-ledge—pushed the door close in order to prevent as much as possible of the infernal din from being heard outside—and then began to flagellate the maniacs one after another with the most merciless severity. Through the bars swept the long knotted lash of the miscreant's knout—a knout of which the present Emperor of Russia (once Queen Victoria's welcomed guest) would have envied him the possession. Vainly did the yelling maniacs endeavour to elude the terrible thong: vainly also did they attempt to seize it and snatch the accursed instrument from his grasp. Practice had made him perfect in its use: frequent trials of its appalling powers had given him a marvellous experience in its efficient wielding. It literally rent the clothes from the backs of the sufferers; and in great livid wales or bloody streaks did the flesh rise up wherever the lash fell. The punishment was diabolical—the accompanying yells and cries were appalling in the extreme!

But, Ah!—all on a sudden a new and fearful interest is given to the scene. For one of those maniacs who had a few minutes before burst from their coercive garments as if it were a mere vesture of tinder that they were casting off,—one of those infuriate lunatics who seemed suddenly to have been inspired with the strength of Sampson, now all in a moment dashed open the iron gate of his cell. It was the lock which gave way:—the bolt bent and yielded as if it were of lead—and the grated door screamed upon its hinges as it flew open!

An ejaculation of anguished terror burst from the lips of the keeper, as a sense of his mortal danger flashed like lightning to his mind. 'Twas the same as if a goaded tiger had suddenly broken loose. Not an instant was there for flight: the door is burst open—and, quick as the eye can wink, the liberated maniac, bounding forth, springs upon his enemy!

Down upon the pavement they roll together:

another yell of agony thrills from the lips of the keeper—and at the next moment his voice is stifled—for the maniac's fingers fasten like an iron vice upon his throat. The suffocating wretch writhes awfully beneath the infuriate lunatic who lies above his convulsing form, with eyes gleaming down in hyena-like rage upon his distorted countenance. Inside the cells every one has become suddenly silent and motionless, as if a consternation had struck upon them all with the influence of a spell; and their countenances, on which the hideous workings seemed to have congealed all in a moment, leaving them horrible and ghastly to contemplate, were fastened as it were against the bars through which their eyes glared like living cinders.

But on the pavement, the work which they are beholding, and the view of which has thus paralysed them all for a few instants,—that dreadful work is now done! Livid with strangulation, and his form still retaining the ominous posture in which it had crisped up as it were in its last convulsions, lay the keeper—an inanimate corpse! His right hand still grasped the merciless weapon the use of which had led to the awful catastrophe that sealed his own fate: his eyes, wide open, appeared ready to start from his head;—and his tongue, black and swollen, lolled out between his foamy lips. All this hideous change had been wrought in a strong, hale, good-looking man in the course of a few short seconds: 'twas the just retribution which accursed tyranny should invariably receive!

The deed, then, was accomplished—and for nearly half a minute did the maniac murderer stand gazing down upon his victim, with mingled compassion and incredulity expressed in every lineament of his haggard countenance. He seemed to be pitying the wretch of whose death he could scarcely believe himself to be the cause. And during that brief interval of half a minute, a profound silence reigned in the mad-cells.

But suddenly the maniac murderer yielded to the impulse of a new instinct. Starting from his motionless attitude of contemplation, he gave utteranee to a wild cry of triumph; and, stooping down, he felt in the pockets of his victim for something which he fancied to be there. Then as he drew forth a bunch of keys which he jingled first as he swept them joyously over his head, and then clanged as he dashed them with a madder triumph against the bars, the prisoners inside the cells took up the cry which had burst from his lips; and the place was once more horribly alive with the din of maniac voices.

To open the gates of the several cells was now the work of a few moments;—and, behold! Melmoth was free—in company with half-a-dozen raging, frenetic, infuriate lunatics! And had they not believed him to be *one of themselves*, they would doubtless have torn him to pieces: but he had been a prisoner with the rest—he was just released with the rest also—and, whatever notion the madmen might have entertained of their own condition and state of mind, they naturally enough regarded Melmoth as a brother-victim to some cruel persecution whence they had now achieved their emancipation.

Seizing the lantern, the maniac who had killed the keeper, rushed forth from the building, followed by all the others, Melmoth still keeping among them. For now that murder had been committed, he more than ever saw the necessity of playing the part of a madman, in case he should be caught and thrust back into his dungeon: and his only chance of escape from the precincts of the workhouse was centred in his adhesion to the little band of lunatics who, he had no doubt, would clear themselves a passage despite of all opposition.

The moment that the madmen burst into the yard, their leader carrying the lantern in his hand, an alarm was raised by some paupers who belonged to the kitchen-department; and the door leading into the main building was instantaneously closed and barricaded by the frightened inmates. The walls round the yard were high: and the only avenue of escape was by means of the door just fastened in the face of the band. This fact Melmoth's eagle eye perceived at a glance; and, urging his rabid companions on, he set them the example of making a desperate onslaught upon that door. With cries of rage and fury the maniacs precipitated themselves against it: it shook—it quivered—the strong planks yielded and cracked in their frame-work;—the assault was renewed—again and again did the desperate men dash headlong as it were, like living waves, against the barrier that opposed their path. Some of the brick-work over the door gave way first, and fell in heavy masses upon the besiegers—maiming, wounding, and injuring them seriously: but, goaded all the more terribly to the execution of their purpose, and lashed up to a degree of ferocious frenzy, the maniacs, bleeding all over, and half blinded with the dust of the dislodged masonry, threw themselves in one dense and compact body against the door. It burst open—or rather, it was dashed completely out of its setting—driven in bodily, as if with the concussion of gunpowder or an explosion of foul air.

Then the maniacs rushed into the kitchen, with which the door communicated; and in a moment every cupboard was torn open—every shelf examined—every nook and corner ransacked. The remains of cold meat were seized upon and devoured with even a cannibal voracity: the bread-store adjoining was pillaged of its contents—a barrel of small beer had its top knocked off and a considerable portion of the liquor disposed of in a few moments—and the buttery was invaded in an equally unsparing manner. The maniacs ate and drank like famished wolves—their bloodshot eyes glaring with a sort of ferocious joy and savage triumph at the whole proceeding. Gladly would Melmoth have urged them to press on at once further into the interior of the building: but he dared not interfere with their revel amongst the provisions until they had gorged themselves to repletion. And to this point did they arrive in an incredibly short space of time: for in about ten minutes their appetites were thoroughly satisfied—and the provender which they could not consume, was scattered and trampled in all directions.

Meanwhile the master of the workhouse had mustered the most active and resolute of the able-bodied paupers; and arming them with pokers, shovels, tongs, broom-sticks, and all such weapons as came ready to hand at the moment, he stationed his force in the hall to resist any farther invasion of the building,—while messengers had been sent off to the Tower to demand the assist-

ance of a few soldiers. The New Police were not in existence in those days; and little or no aid was to be expected from the parish constables or night-watchmen: the master was therefore compelled to rely upon such resources and means of defence as he had at his command upon the spot, until the soldiery should arrive.

But no sooner had the maniacs done their work in the kitchen, the bread-store, and the buttery, than Melmoth bade them seize upon the implements which those offices contained, and which constituted weapons of a more formidable character than the fire-irons and broom-handles of the enemy. Thus, when the liberated lunatics sprang up the staircase brandishing roasting-spits, choppers, mallets, and carving-knives, the paupers with the master at their head all took to flight in a moment;—and, giving vent to cries of triumph and yells of frenetic joy, the madmen impulsively followed Melmoth who had now become their leader.

The hall was in their possession: the front door led into the street—and the path to liberty thus lay open and undisputed before them. But Melmoth was anxious to take his children with him: for, even in the wild whirl of his present thoughts and the terrible excitement under which he was labouring, he had leisure and the clearness of intellect sufficient to comprehend that from this time forth he must expect to be hunted by the blood-hounds of justice, and he might never find another opportunity of holding communication with those who were nearest and dearest to him. For an instant he hesitated what course to adopt: the next moment his resolve was taken;—and rushing up the staircase leading from the hall towards the infirmary, he bade the maniacs follow him. Those instincts and impulses which the voice of an angel could not have appeased nor tranquillised, were still easy to direct into any particular channel,—as the torrent, which no mortal arm can stay, will nevertheless pour into the canals that are dug to receive its foaming volume and drain the land which it would otherwise inundate. Thus, as man's ingenuity may turn the course of a flood which he is utterly powerless to stop, so did the influence of Melmoth guide the movements of the maniacs whose progress and whose fury he could not possibly have checked even had he been so disposed.

Up the stairs they rushed—uttering frightful yells and giving vent to diabolical menaces,—brandishing their terrible weapons with ferocious gestures—their eyes glaring wildly—their lips covered with blood-speckled foam. Doors were banged and barricaded all along the passages; and from the interior of the rooms the shrieks of frightened women burst forth. But the lunatic party, headed by its frenzied leader, paused not to attack those chambers: up the flights of stairs they all sped—and into the infirmary they burst as if it were a roaring, raging torrent, dashing open the doors with an irresistible power.

The invalids gave vent to cries of terror—the drunken nurse fell down in a fit—and Melmoth's children were startled from the sleep in which they had been plunged. Instantaneously recognising their father, their first impulse was to spring forth and fly into his arms: but when they saw that he held an enormous steel chopper in his hand and that he was backed by half-a-dozen ferocious-looking men all armed in a formidable style, they huddled together with mingled cries, and lamentations, and prayers. There was not a moment to lose;—for Melmoth knew full well that some kind of succour must presently arrive to aid the governor of the workhouse in restoring order. He therefore commanded his children to rise—put on their clothing—and follow him. Yielding to the voice of paternal authority, they hastened to obey, but with cruel fear and visible trembling: and despite of the reassuring words which he now breathed rapidly in their ears, as he assisted them in resuming their apparel, they contemplated him with a terror and a grief that lacerated his very heart.

Two or three minutes were thus expended;—and during that brief interval the maniacs ransacked a cupboard in which a few pots of jam and some bottles, each containing a small allowance of Port wine, were kept for the use of the invalids. These things were disposed of in a trice;—and then the lunatics, inflamed by the wine, began to dance and caper about the room in a style that would have been grotesque enough, were not the presence of these unfortunate wretches so eminently alarming. They however attempted no injury towards the occupants of the infirmary;—and when Melmoth's children were ready to take their departure, they obeyed in a moment the signal which their leader gave them to withdraw.

Down the stairs did the party rush once more,—Melmoth holding his little girl by the hand, and his two sons following close behind him. No molestation was experienced—no opposition presented itself. Indeed, the path was as clear for the formidable band as if they were the only inmates of the workhouse: for the master and his able-bodied paupers did not dare show themselves again—and the soldiery had not as yet had time to arrive from the Tower. The hall was gained—the front door thrown open—and then, simultaneously flinging away their weapons, as if an instinctive feeling suddenly prompted them to act with caution in order to secure their freedom, the lunatics rushed into the street. Darting away in different directions, they disappeared in a few moments;—and Melmoth, thus rid of their terrible companionship, plunged into the maze of dark and narrow streets in the vicinage of the old workhouse.

Taking up the little girl in his arms, he bade the two boys keep close behind him;—and as they sped along, the kind and consoling words which the unfortunate man addressed to his motherless children, reassured them completely, and made their poor hearts rejoice that they were thus restored to the care of their father.

CHAPTER CLXXXV.

TREACHERY.

It was about nine o'clock on the same evening that witnessed the exciting occurrences at Whitechapel Workhouse; and the scene now shifts to Paradise Villas.

In the front parlour of their residence Octavia and Pauline Clarendon were seated, in company with Mr. and Mrs. Page. The curtains were drawn—the lights were burning upon the table—

and the ex-bagman was enjoying a glass of brandy-and-water, of which his spouse occasionally took a sip. This "worthy couple" had "just dropped in" half-an-hour previously, ostensibly to inquire after Octavia's health and have a little chat with Pauline —but in reality with a treacherous and sinister intention, as will shortly transpire.

Pauline was pale and care-worn; and although she endeavoured to appear as gay as possible in order to rally the spirits of her poor afflicted sister, and likewise for the purpose of treating Mr. and Mrs. Page with the courtesy which she was willing to display in return for many apparent civilities and neighbourly attentions on their part, —there were nevertheless moments when she fell into a profound reverie and the expression of her countenance denoted that the saddest thoughts were dominant in her mind.

Octavia was much altered—Oh! so much, that had the Prince of Wales suddenly entered and gazed upon her *now*, he would scarcely have believed that this was the same blooming, smiling, happy creature who but comparatively a few weeks back had surrendered her virgin charms to his embraces. Three months and a half had only elapsed since the memorable evening when accident first threw the royal voluptuary in the way of the beautiful sisters,—three months and a half since he first saw and desired Octavia Clarendon: and during that interval how much had taken place to change both her mental condition and her personal appearance!

The charming freshness of youth,—with its peach-bloom upon its cheeks, its sunny brightness in the eyes, its willowy elasticity in the figure, and its graceful airiness in the footstep,—Oh! all this was gone;—and Octavia, though still eminently beautiful and perhaps more interesting than ever, was but the shadow of her former self! Her cheeks had lost their plump fulness and their carnation

hues of health: slightly sunken, they were pale and colourless, alike with the canker of care and the blight of sickness. Her eyes,—no longer rolling in a voluptuous languor, nor lighting up with the flame of fervid passion and joyous emotion,—were fixed in look, and full of a deep, deep melancholy, varied at intervals by a certain vacancy which indicated that recently unsettled condition of the mind whence she had not altogether recovered. The rich contours of her form still retained their development, because she was naturally modelled upon a scale of the finest proportions: but they had lost that well rounded plumpness which endowed them with so voluptuous a charm and which elevated the softness of feminine beauty into the splendour of a magnificent womanhood. She had grown thinner, to speak in common terms;—and yet, any admirer of the sex who had never seen her before, would not hesitate even now to pronounce her a most lovely creature, alike in face and form.

We have already observed that she was in the way to become a mother: but her condition in this respect was not as yet apparent. At the same time the truth—*this* truth—was, as a matter of course, known unto herself, and to Pauline,—known also to Mr. and Mrs. Page, who had discovered the secret in the way already explained by the former in his conversation with the Prince of Wales. To his Royal Highness that secret had been communicated by Pauline in a brief but touching letter; for the maiden considered it to be her duty to make that announcement to the father of the babe which Octavia bore in her bosom. That letter was however dated from no particular address,—obvious reasons inducing Pauline to conceal her place of abode from the knowledge of the man who, after seducing her sister, had sought to dishonour herself!

The visits of Mr. and Mrs. Page would have been cheerfully dispensed with by the Honourable Miss Pauline Clarendon: but, as we have ere now stated, they had exhibited so much neighbourly friendship towards the sisters, that it was impossible to receive them otherwise than with due courtesy. Although she had gained so much bitter experience in the reading of the world's lessons, and although the manifold dark phases of the human character had been forced upon her contemplation by such a series of infelicitous circumstances, yet her confidence in her species was not so utterly destroyed as to render her suspicious without a cause. She therefore saw no selfish, sinister, nor interested motive in the kindness which Page and his spouse appeared to demonstrate towards her sister and herself: she looked upon him as a well meaning, bustling man, somewhat eccentric and prying withal—and upon his wife as a good-natured woman, excessively ignorant and supremely vulgar;—but she would have been startled with surprise indeed, had any body whispered in her ears a single word calculated to throw a proper light upon the character and disposition of that mean, unprincipled, intriguing, hypocritical couple.

And thus, upon the occasion specified at the opening of this chapter, we find Mr. and Mrs. Page comfortably ensconced in the handsomely-furnished parlour of the villa occupied by Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

"Might I inquire, without being deemed impertinent," said Mr. Page, after a brief lapse in the discourse, "whether you have seen your noble father lately, Miss Pauline?"

"No—I have not seen him for some time," answered the young lady: then, in an abstracted mood, she added, "Not since the day of his marriage with Miss Aylmer."

"And does he not know where you are residing?" demanded the ex-bagman. "Does he not also know——"

And he glanced significantly towards Octavia, who at that moment was gazing vacantly upon the carpet.

"No—no," replied Pauline, with something like mingled impatience and bitterness in her tone: then, in a low and hurried whisper, she observed, "Do not, I implore you, speak upon any topic which may touch a painful chord in the heart of my poor sister."

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated Mr. Page, but in a similarly subdued voice. "I should be sorry indeed to disturb a mind which within the last few days has made such marvellous progress towards the recovery of its equilibrium. But is it possible," he asked in a whisper, "that Lord Holderness is unacquainted with his daughter's affliction—and its cause?"

"My father knows that Octavia became the victim of her unfortunate love for the Prince of Wales," responded Pauline, in a tone that was scarcely audible and with a look full of emotion;—"and he knows likewise that her reason was affected. But he is ignorant——My God! that I can even sustain my feelings at the idea!——he is ignorant, I say, that my poor sister is in a way calculated to afford living evidence of her dishonour!"

And the tears rolled down Pauline's cheeks as she thus spoke.

"Come, come, my dear young lady, cheer up," said Mrs. Page, now taking upon herself the part of consoler.

"It is not so easy to cheer up, Julia," remarked her husband, "when one has many causes of affliction to contemplate and experience. Is your father happy and comfortable in this alliance which he has formed?" asked the ex-bagman, once more giving free vent to his curiosity.

"I cannot say—I know nothing of the matter, Mr. Page," answered Pauline, speaking in a tone which plainly declared that the subject was disagreeable to her.

"Well, Miss—I will not utter another word upon the topic," said the ex-bagman. "By the bye, I believe that unhappy young gentleman, the Hon. Arthur Eaton, is a relation of yours—is he not?"

Pauline replied in the affirmative.

"But do you believe him guilty of the frightful deed imputed to him?" asked Mr. Page.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the generous-hearted maiden, her cheeks flushing with indignation at the bare suspicion which the query implied against a young man whose soul, she felt assured, was full of the loftiest and noblest feelings. "Depend upon it," she continued, with a marked emphasis, "that my cousin Arthur is as innocent of that foul crime as I am myself,—and his guiltlessness will become apparent when the judicial investigation takes place. At least, I should hope that the strange and mysterious circumstances which have combined to make him a victim, will be fully and completely unravelled——"

"I hope so too," exclaimed Mr. Page. "But not knowing anything of the young gentleman, I must confess that I took rather an unfavourable view of the business, after reading the newspaper reports."

"Was not the accusation first made against a young female whose innocence speedily became apparent?" asked Pauline: "and may not my cousin in the same manner have become, as I just now expressed myself, the victim of circumstantial evidence? The same almighty providence which decreed the justification of Miss Rose Foster, will likewise make manifest the innocence of Mr. Arthur Eaton. At least, I sincerely hope so," added Pauline emphatically.

"Let me see," observed Mr. Page;—"he has been in prison now upwards of a month—and all the newspapers declared at the time that he was a monomaniac. I suppose he will be put upon his trial all the same?"

"He will assuredly court the fullest investigation," answered Pauline. "The rapid succession of unfortunate incidents which have occupied the interval since the mysterious event took place, has altogether prevented me from visiting my cousin and affording him my sympathy. In fact, I have scarcely dared to leave my sister for a single moment," continued the young lady, again lowering her voice to such a tone as to be inaudible to Octavia: "otherwise I should have assuredly repaired to the dreadful prison in which Arthur Eaton is confined, and by my presence have assured him that there was at least one person in the world who did not believe him guilty of the crime imputed to him. But, although I was unable to visit him, I did not forget to write," added Pauline; "and I assured him of my sympathy."

"You acted most generously," said Mr. Page. "I suppose his father—Lord Marchmont, I believe—is dreadfully cut up?"

"The unhappy old nobleman has been confined to his bed ever since the fatal occurrence which threw so dark an aspersion upon the fame of his beloved son," replied Pauline: "but as the trial must soon take place, let us hope that the result will restore Mr. Eaton to liberty and honour, and his sire to health and happiness."

The conversation was at this moment interrupted by a knock at the front door;—and Mr. Page interchanged a rapid and somewhat uneasy look with his better half. This furtive glance was however unnoticed by Pauline, whose attention was instantaneously directed towards her sister; inasmuch as any sudden noise, especially a knock or ring at the door, invariably produced a startling effect upon her nerves.

Several heavy footsteps were now heard in the passage; and the maid-servant, opening the parlour-door, said, "Some persons wish to speak to you, Miss, if you please."

But before Pauline had time to utter a syllable in reply, the visitors pushed somewhat rudely past the domestic and entered the parlour. They consisted of three men, not over prepossessing in their appearance, and whose aspect at once produced upon Pauline the effect of an evil presentiment,—while the same frightened feeling was experienced by Octavia, who, starting to her feet, clung to her sister's arm as a daughter might throw herself upon the protection of a fond mother.

As for Mr. and Mrs. Page—*they* once more exchanged rapid glances; and in the look of the former there appeared to be a transitory expression of regret for some treacherous part which he was playing—whereas the woman's features were stamped with a cold and selfish decision.

"What do you require of me?" asked Pauline, now recovering her presence of mind and addressing the three men, who were gazing first at her and then at her sister.

"Which is Miss Octavia Clarendon?" demanded the foremost of the party.

"Oh! what do they mean to do with me?" exclaimed the unhappy young lady whose name had just been mentioned: and she clasped her hands in despair.

"Explain the nature of your visit — and be speedy," said Pauline wrestling painfully against the strong spasm which ran through her entire frame: for once more did the presentiment of evil flame up with an appalling brilliancy in her mind.

"Well, we won't keep you any longer in suspense, Miss," returned the spokesman of the party. "The truth is that Dr. Wigton and Dr. Smanks have consulted together—and they've come to the unanimous conclusion that it would be much more conducive to Miss Octavia's health and peace of mind, if she was taken proper care of for a short time—a few months, or so;—and they've signed a certificate to that effect. This certificate has been placed in the hands of Dr. Burton; and we're the doctor's men. There's a chaise waiting outside——"

"O God! I understand you now too well—too well!" shrieked forth Pauline, all the anguish which had been accumulating while the man was speaking, now finding scope for the development of its pent-up fury: and wildly she flung her arms around her sister's neck, exclaiming, "No—no—they shall not take thee from me, my own beloved Octavia!—they shall not separate us thus!"

"What mean you, dearest?" cried the elder Miss Clarendon, returning the fond—the fervid pressure of her sister's embrace. "Who will take me from you?" she asked, with a terrible calmness which was evidently the sure precursor of a still more frightful storm.

"Oh! Octavia—dearest, dearest Octavia," exclaimed Pauline, in a voice of the most rending, piercing, desolating agony,—"they wish to take you from me——My God! they mean to separate us! Oh! we are motherless—we are all the same as if we were fatherless likewise——we are two orphan sisters——yes, two orphan sisters——alone and friendless in the world! And they will not allow us to remain together——they would tear us asunder—separate us——"

"No—no: they shall not—they shall not!" screamed forth Octavia: and, falling upon her knees at her sister's feet, she gazed up with a sudden expression of frenzied terror settling upon her countenance so marble pale. "Pauline—Pauline—you will not let me go!—you will not let me be torn from you! They will place me upon the rack—they will subject me to the torture—they will put out my eyes—they will cut off my tongue—they will tear my flesh with red-hot pincers——"

"O horror! she is going mad again—mad!—mad!" shrieked Pauline, her own brain reeling with delirium as she thus gave unguarded and uncontrollable vent to her mortal fear.

"Mad! mad!" echoed Octavia, starting up to her feet like a body suddenly galvanized: and ex-

tending her arms towards the three men, who were slowly advancing farther into the room, she cried, 'Avaunt, wretches! I know ye but too well! Ye are the myrmidons of the Prince—ye are the same who slew the young princes in the Tower centuries ago—ye are gifted with immortal life that ye may wreak immortal injury—ye are fiends in human shape. Avaunt! avaunt!"

And while the colour mounted to her cheeks, through the intensity of excitement, and her eyes glared with appalling wildness, and her bosom rose and fell with rapid convulsive heavings—or rather, stifled sobs—she stood in the midst of that apartment, her fine form drawn up to its full height, and her arms still extended with the air of a Pythoness looking into a terrible futurity.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia—calm yourself, I implore you!" exclaimed Pauline, stricken with a frightful remorse at the unguarded expressions to which she had given utterance with respect to her sister's mental affliction.

"It is for you to calm yourself likewise, dear young lady," said Mr. Page, taking her by one hand, while Julia caught hold of her by the other. "Pray compose yourself—be tranquil!" continued the ex-bagman, with an officiousness in his attempt at consolation which would have at once excited the suspicions of Pauline had she enjoyed the use of her discriminative powers at the moment.

"Yes—for heaven's sake tranquillise yourself!" said Mrs. Page; and as she and her husband both persisted in holding Pauline by the arms, under the semblance of administering solace and bestowing friendly attentions upon her, she was in fact retained a prisoner in their grasp.

This was no doubt the signal previously agreed upon between the treacherous couple and the mad-doctor's emissaries: for while Pauline was struggling to escape from the hold which they maintained upon her, the three men seized on Octavia and began dragging her from the room.

"Let me go, I command you—let me go, I implore you!" exclaimed Pauline, with desperate efforts to escape from Page and his wife—while Octavia's screams were suddenly hushed by one of the men placing his hand upon her mouth.

"You will do yourself an injury, dear young lady—pray be tranquil!" cried Page, forcing Pauline down into an arm-chair.

The wretched girl beheld the ruffian gagging her unhappy sister as his two companions forced her out of the room, despite the tremendous efforts which she made to escape from their power: then a sudden dizziness came over Pauline—everything disappeared from her view—every sound died away in her ears—and she fainted!

When she awoke to consciousness once more, it seemed as if she were slowly recovering from the effects of a hideous night-mare: but as her ideas gradually arranged themselves in her mind, a gathering wildness, mingled with terror, appeared upon her countenance;—and when she cast her looks with an expression of hurried and anxious inquiry around, and saw Page and his wife bending over her—but beheld *not* the dear object whom those searching glances sought—all the heart-rending reality of the previous scene burst upon her comprehension! Then, with a wild shriek, she started up—but staggered immediately beneath the overwhelming weight of her dire affliction;—and, falling upon her knees, she extended her clasped hands towards Page, exclaiming, "Tell me, sir—tell me what they have done with my sister!"

"Dear young lady, pray tranquillise yourself," said the ex-bagman. "Look upon me and my wife—that is to say, Mrs. Page—as your sincere and devoted friends, who will see your sister's wrongs avenged——"

"But what have they done with her?—where is she gone?" demanded Pauline, springing up from her suppliant posture, and speaking with a petulance indicative of the most cruel suspense and nervous impatience.

"I am as ignorant as yourself, my dear Miss Clarendon, upon those points," replied the ex-bagman. "Am I not, Mrs. P.?"

"Oh! then Octavia is torn away from me—and I am alone—alone!" cried the wretched, wretched Pauline, cutting short the answer which Julia was just commencing: and, falling back into the arm-chair, she covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

Mr. and Mrs. Page proffered their hypocritical consolations: but the blow which had stricken the young maiden so suddenly and so heavily, was not to be mitigated in its effects by any words of human solace, however sincere and however replete with sympathy that language might be. Therefore, although she suspected not for a single moment the treacherous part which her false friends had been playing, she refused all the consolatory suggestions which they pretended to offer her: she would not listen to their proposal that she should pass the night at their house—she was equally peremptory in declining the offer that Julia made to remain and take care of her;—but hastening up to her own chamber, she locked the door—and, finging herself more than half distracted upon the bed, gave way to all the violence of a grief which human language has no power to describe.

CHAPTER CLXXXVI.

AN EVENING AT CARLTON HOUSE.

A MONTH had elapsed since the occurrences related in the preceding chapter; and it was now the middle of smiling, warm, and sunny May.

Once more must we conduct our readers to the private apartment of the Prince of Wales,—that apartment which he had not ceased to render serviceable to his intrigues and voluptuous enjoyments, although a wife now slept beneath the roof of Carlton House.

But into that chamber so luxuriously fitted up, and having the advantage of the private staircase,—into that room embellished with equivocal pictures, we say, the footsteps of the Princess Caroline had not yet penetrated.

Their Royal Highnesses still ostensibly occupied the same bed-chamber: that is to say, the Prince was wont to pass the night with his wife when he was not too tipsy to seek her presence there, or when he was not more agreeably engaged in his own private apartment. But as these occurrences happened somewhat frequently, it may be taken upon an average that his Royal Highness honoured the Princess with his company about four nights out of

the seven in every week that had as yet elapsed since the matrimonial knot was tied. His insulting neglect and cruel indifference had begun full early, and were increasing daily and hourly: but still the Princess complained not to *him!* Nevertheless, she *had* a confidant to whom she unbosomed all her thoughts;—and that viper whom she thus unconsciously fostered in her bosom, was Lady Jersey.

But we have not yet reached that point when it will be necessary for us to enter upon details so painful and incidents so heart-rending that we already tremble in anticipation of the tremendous task we have yet to fulfil. For the present we have to record another of the manifold voluptuous diversions in which it so frequently pleased his Royal Highness to indulge.

It was, then, as we have already stated, in the middle of the smiling month of May—and at about ten o'clock in the evening—that the Prince of Wales was engaged in the contemplation of a somewhat singular spectacle of which his private apartment was the scene.

The heavy hangings were drawn over the windows—the wax-candles were lighted—and the atmosphere of the chamber was perfumed with the choice flowers that filled the porcelain vases. His Royal Highness, who had not long quitted the dinner-table, was elegantly dressed in evening costume: his countenance was flushed not only with drinking, but likewise by the exciting scene on which his eyes were gloatingly fixed.

For on a tight-rope fastened across the room, at a distance of about three feet from the floor, a trio of beauteous creatures were dancing in a style which combined all the fascinating graces of the art with the most exquisite refinement of sensual provocation.

Through the gauzy dresses which the three charmers wore, the eye could almost trace and follow all the flowing outlines of those forms that were so admirable in their symmetry and so supple in all their movements. To the flexible grace of the swan's neck might be added the coiling power of the serpent, as the attributes of the lovely shapes that glided floatingly over the gently yielding rope. Never was elegance of motion more enchantingly blended with the soft sensuousness of amorous looks, than in the performance of those three accomplished votaries of the Terpsichorean art: never was the classic poesy of flowing attitude more effectively warmed into voluptuousness, than when these dancers adapted the varying expression of their ravishing countenances to the silent harmony of their movements.

It was a species of physical coquetry appealing to the sense in every undulation of the form—in every gesture of the arms—in every step of the feet—in every glance shot forth from the eyes—in every look assumed by the features—in every smile that shone sunnily upon the lips. Now, as if upborne by some invisible power, the exquisite forms floated airily along the rope which the classically moulded feet appeared not to touch: now with slow, measured, and surpassingly graceful curves and inflections of the body, the superb contours of the bust would be altogether revealed:—and now the gradual rounding of the arms and their elevation over the head, would display to ineffable advantage their finished proportions and the ravishing beauty of the hands. Or the eyes, having suddenly flashed forth glances of burning desire, would by degrees mitigate the brilliancy of their lightnings and melt into the warm and continuous tenderness of an autumnal sunset,—so that the looks which at first dazzled, penetrated, and bewildered, now inspired feelings of delicious rapture and sensuous softness. At the same time, perhaps, the lips would part in their moist redness, like a luscious fruit of the tropics, and slowly reveal teeth of pearly purity.

Then, again, the dancers would balance themselves with the points of their feet upon the rope;—those feet, so pliant and so yielding, stretched out, or rather *downward*, in such a manner that they seemed to form the unbroken and tapering continuation of the leg itself, without a joint: and in this attitude, the difficulty of maintaining which appeared to demand no additional effort, would they remain for upwards of a minute, throwing into their forms all the poetic grace of the Greek statues. Then, resuming their wavy, floating, flowing movements, they would sustain such a perfect uniformity of motion, attitude, and even look, that it appeared as if the two were but the shadows of the one. Thus, in a thousand little ways and with all the skill and artifice of that which we have above denominated a *physical coquetry*, did those three syren-dancers detail as it were beauty after beauty, and display charm after charm, to the enraptured view of their royal spectator.

And beautiful indeed were the females who thus exhibited their accomplishments and developed their fascinations in the presence of his Royal Highness. They were young—and, although not virtuous, had lost nothing of the first freshness of youth. No artificial hue gave that bloom to their cheeks: no cosmetic was needed to enhance the brilliant transparency and dazzling whiteness of their skin. Their flesh was firm and plump to the eye; their shapes depended not upon the compressure of the corset to mark the flowing outlines or sustain the well-developed contours. Mingled grace and voluptuousness, elegance and soft lubricity, rendered them charming as dancers and desirable as women;—and the Prince, doubtless knowing beforehand how agreeable would be the recreation which Germain had thus provided for him, was resolved to be alone in its enjoyment. None of his boon companions were therefore present at the enchanting spectacle: the royal profligate had it all to himself!

For nearly an hour did the exhibition last,—broken by occasional intervals of repose on the part of the dancers, when they descended from the rope and partook of the champagne which the Prince poured out for them with his own hand. Nor did he fail to bestow upon them the most fervid caresses, and manifest his appreciation of their exquisite beauty by means of tender dalliance and toyings. Then, when the performance was concluded and the three dancers were in reality unable to conceal their weariness any longer, the Prince made them draw lots to decide who should remain as his companion for the rest of the night. The delicate point being duly settled, the two unlucky ones took their leave of the Prince and departed by means of the private staircase; while the fortunate young lady on whom the lot fell, remained alone with his Royal Highness.

The Prince now rang the bell to give some orders to Germain ere he retired for the night: and in a few moments the discreet and faithful Frenchman made his appearance.

"You will request the Countess of Jersey to inform her Royal Highness," said the Prince, "that I shall be compelled to sit up until a very late hour for the purpose of examining a mass of papers relative to the Duchy of Cornwall. Her Royal Highness will thence understand that I intend to remain in my own apartment to-night. You may now retire, Germain."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the valet, "a person who has been waiting for the last two hours, earnestly besought me to become the bearer of this note. I assured him that your Royal Highness was exceedingly occupied with important business——"

"And so I have been," exclaimed the Prince, bestowing a smile upon the dancing-girl who was seated near him. "But where is this note?—and who is the individual?"

Germain handed his royal master a sealed letter, —observing at the same time, "The gentleman declines giving his name, and is even careful to conceal his countenence as much as he can."

The Prince took the note and opened it in an idle, leisurely manner: but the instant that his eyes caught a glimpse of the signature, a serious expression seized as it were upon his features;—and, with a degree of interest as absorbing as it was suddenly excited, he read the following lines:—

"Your Royal Highness will remember the solemn pledge which you gave me on a particular occasion,—a pledge to the effect that when the proper time should arrive, your Royal Highness would assist me in the accomplishment of that aim which can alone render life tolerable. May I therefore implore your Royal Highness to fulfil the promise so generously made?—and as my suspense is too acute to brook delay ere I receive from the lips of your Royal Highness a reiteration of that promise, I humbly but earnestly beseech the favour of a few moments' audience this evening.

"THE RESUSCITATED."

Having perused this note, the Prince tore it up into small pieces, which he threw under the grate. He then reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute,—deliberating within himself whether he should grant the interview solicited, or not. But suddenly resolving upon the affirmative course, he rose from his seat—apologised to the dancing-girl for being compelled to quit her for a little while—and hastened to the Red Drawing Room, where he was accustomed to receive visitors upon private business. Germain then proceeded to the waiting-room to conduct the stranger to the presence of his royal master; and in a few minutes a tall man, enveloped in a cloak (despite the warmth of the weather), and holding a large silk handkerchief up to his face, was introduced into the Red Drawing Room.

Germain immediately retired;—and the Prince, walking straight up to the visitor, said in a low and agitated tone, "Have you not acted most imprudently, Mr. Ramsey, in coming hither?"

"I hope that your Royal Highness will not frown upon me for the great liberty which I have taken," observed the resuscitated criminal, withdrawing the handkerchief which he had been holding up to his nose as if he were labouring under a violent cold: "but I have only just returned to London, after an absence of more than two months from England——"

"Ah! you have been out of the country, then, ?" exclaimed the Prince. "Why, in the name of heaven, did you not remain abroad altogether?"

"It was my original design to proceed to America and thence write to your Royal Highness to implore your generous though secret intervention with the Government in my behalf," said Ramsey. "But circumstances occurred at sea, which compelled me to return to England——"

"And what were those circumstances?" demanded the Prince, impatiently. "Let me know everything — explain your exact position—state what you have to fear, and what to hope—and then I shall be enabled to judge how far I can assist you. But do not over-rate my influence with the Government, Mr. Ramsey: for, if you know anything of the present state of parties and polical interests in this country, you must be aware that the Prince of Wales," added his Royal Highness bitterly, "is a mere cypher in the estimation of the Ministry. Nevertheless," he hastened to observe, "there may be ways and means of serving you: for what I cannot accomplish myself, I often achieve through the influence of those noblemen who enjoy the confidence of the Cabinet and are yet secretly devoted to me."

"I will explain as briefly as I can, the circumstances which compelled me to return to England," said Ramsey.

The Prince flung himself upon a sofa, and pointed to a chair, which the resuscitated criminal took.

"Proceed, then," said the heir-apparent. "I am prepared to listen attentively."

"It was in the early part of March," continued Ramsey, "that I embarked at Liverpool on board a schooner, named the *Fire-fly*, and bound for the United States. I was known on board as Mr. Gustavus Wakefield; and no one entertained the slightest suspicion that there was anything peculiar connected with my history. A month elapsed, during which our course was delayed by tempestuous weather: but we were nearing the place of destination, when we came in collision with a pirate brig, called the *Royal George* All the crew of the *Fire-fly* were slain in the conflict, with the exception of a common sailor and myself; and we were taken prisoners by the pirates. This was the first occurrence so specially ominous to myself, which had taken place since I quitted Liverpool: for, lo and behold! in the persons of the two chiefs of the freebooters, I recognised a couple of scoundrels with whom circumstances had made me acquainted in England."

"Then they were British pirates — eh?" exclaimed the Prince, interrogatively. "And they had the consummate insolence to name their ship the *Royal George?* Did I not understand you that such was the case?"

"Your Royal Highness is correct," responded the resuscitated criminal. "The real truth is that the two men to whom I have alluded, were compromised in some of the details of the affair which threw me into the grasp of justice—and sent me to the scaffold," added Ramsey, his voice suddenly sinking to a scarcely audible tone. "Joseph Warren, better known to the world of crime by the

name of the Magsman—and Stephen Price, notorious under the appellation of the Big Beggarman ——But your Royal Highness will pardon me," cried Ramsey, abruptly checking himself, as he saw a sudden and remarkable change come over the countenance and the manner of the Prince: "I know that I ought not even to allude to such wretches in your presence—but the circumstances of my narrative constrained me thus to mention names well calculated to shock your ears——"

"Do not pause to offer apologies, Mr. Ramsey," exclaimed his Royal Highness, now recovering from the effects of the various disagreeable reminiscences which the abrupt mention of the name of Joe Warren, *alias* the Magsman, had excited in his mind. "It is impossible to repress a feeling of disgust at the thought of such men——But pray continue your narrative. You were telling me that you recognised those two ruffians;—and I suppose, therefore, that they recognised you also?"

"They did, your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey; "and I was compelled to implore and beseech them, almost on bended knees—but certainly with tearful eyes—not to betray my tremendous secret."

"Did they menace you on that head?" asked the Prince.

"No: on the contrary, they promised fairly enough," observed the resuscitated: "but what reliance could I place in such miscreants?"

"Miscreants, indeed!" muttered the heir-apparent to himself. "Pray continue your history, sir," he exclaimed aloud. "I presume that they compelled *you* to turn pirate?"

"There was no leisure for such a proceeding on their part, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey: "for within a few hours after the freebooters had captured and sunk the *Fire-fly*, one of his Majesty's ships came in sight. The *Royal George* vainly endeavoured to escape from the British frigate; and the result was that the pirates were captured by the *Diana*——"

"The *Diana*!" echoed the Prince, instantaneously recollecting that this was the very same frigate in which Tim Meagles had been so unceremoniously packed off out of the country.

"That was the name of his Majesty's frigate on board of which I was transferred along with the rest," answered Ramsey. "It was in virtue of a compact proposed by the captain of the *Diana*, that the affair proved a bloodless one; and the only persons whom the captain regarded as pirates were Joseph Warren and Stephen Price. They were placed in irons, to be kept until the ship should return to England, in order to take their trial according to the usual routine—the result of which will probably be——"

"Their death at Execution Dock, I hope," added the Prince abruptly. "The sooner such rascals are put out of the way, the better. But did you see on board the *Diana* any one bearing the name of Meagles?"

"Certainly, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey: "and it was in consequence of something which occurred relative to himself, that the *Diana* eventually put back to England."

"Explain the circumstances," said the Prince, wishing to see whether Meagles had proved at all communicative to his fellow-passengers on board the *Diana*.

"About ten days after the incident with the pirates," proceeded the resuscitated criminal, "we were overtaken by a fast-sailing cruiser, just as we were within sight of American land; and this vessel brought out despatches for the captain of the *Diana*, ordering him to return to England forthwith. It was well known on board that Mr. Meagles had been sent away in the first instance on account of some treasonable affairs in which he was supposed to have been implicated at home—at least such was the report,—and the original instructions of the captain were to land him in America. But the counter-orders seemed to imply that he had either been pardoned, or that he was innocent of the matter charged against him: for the captain, after reading the despatches, told him that he need no longer consider himself a prisoner, and that he was to be taken back to his native land."

"Accursed Letitia Lade!" muttered the Prince to himself. "It was you, wretch as you are, that forced me into the necessity of pleading at the Home Office for the pardon of Meagles!" he added, in the same musing tone to himself, but still apostrophising the absent Amazon.

"Did your Royal Highness make an observation?" asked Ramsey, fancying that he heard the Prince saying something.

"Yes—no—nothing of importance," replied the heir-apparent. "Were you and Meagles friendly during the voyage home?"

"I saw but little of him, your Royal Highness," answered the resuscitated. "The truth is that I affected to be seriously indisposed, and was kindly accommodated with a cabin to myself, in which I remained almost constantly: for I need hardly remind your Royal Highness that I was in an incessant dread of either being recognised, or else of hearing something which might throw me into a confusion calculated to engender the strangest suspicions. Moreover, Meagles had so ingratiated himself with the officers of the ship, that even before his pardon arrived, it seemed that he had been treated by them with the utmost consideration and attention,—dining at their mess—constantly in their company—smoking, drinking, singing, and card-playing——"

"And after his pardon *did* overtake him, I suppose he was more sought after and caressed than ever?" said the Prince, interrogatively. "But—to return entirely to your own affairs," he added, without waiting for an answer, "did you escape recognition after all?—or did those villains, Warren and his accomplice, betray you?"

"I escaped recognition—and they did not betray me," replied Philip Ramsey. "But when we all landed yesterday at Portsmouth, Joseph Warren took the opportunity to place his finger upon his lip and make me a sign which was significant enough."

"What did he mean?" demanded the Prince.

"I will explain myself to your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey. "The principal witnesses against this Warren and Stephen Price relative to the destruction of the *Fire-fly* and the murder of the crew, are myself and the sailor who, though seriously wounded in the fray, has since completely recovered. It is true that a couple of Warren's men, named Watkins and Bradley, have agreed to turn king's evidence: but their testimony would be to some extent suspicious, from the very posi-

tion they were in as officers of the pirate-ship. Therefore the evidence of myself and the man Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Firefly*, will be needed upon the trial. The captain of the *Diana*, believing me to be a respectable merchant, allowed me at once to come to London, on my solemn pledge to appear as a witness when the Admiralty Court shall require my presence;—and Warren, doubtless having heard it whispered that such was the fact, gave me as we landed the significant look of which I have spoken and which expressed the word '*Beware*' as eloquently as a glance and gesture can possibly perform the part of the language of the tongue."

"And now what do you propose to do, Mr. Ramsey?—and what do you wish me to undertake in your behalf?" asked the heir-apparent.

"My pardon, great Prince!—my pardon!" exclaimed the unhappy man, clasping his hands together, while the big tear-drops rolled down his handsome though somewhat care-worn countenance.

"But if you obtained it, would you show yourself boldly abroad again in the world?" demanded the Prince.

"No—never—never!" hastily replied the resuscitated. "But I should at least enjoy the assurance of personal safety, and not tremble at every searching look that might accidentally be fixed upon me."

"Are you afraid that even if you were recognised by any one who had known you formerly, such an individual would be stern, and harsh, and cruel enough to give you up to justice after all you have undergone?"

"Yes—oh! yes—I am convinced of it!" exclaimed Ramsey, with considerable excitement both in his tone and manner. "First, there is Sir Richard Stamford himself, who would show me no mercy: then there is a certain nobleman of lofty rank and great wealth, who discovered that I was the object of his wife's tenderest and best affections, and who indeed was the main cause of my abrupt departure from England—a course to which he urged me by means of the most terrible threats of vengeance."

"What! did this amour take place *after* your trial and——"

"And execution, your Royal Highness would add," said Ramsey, in a low deep tone which was also penetrated with a slight accent of bitterness. "But no matter—I must make up my mind to adopt that *one* tremendous incident in my life as the date which closes one portion of my career and marks the opening of another. It is as it were the date of death and life!"

"And a noble lady loved you since that fatal era in your existence?" mused the Prince, without heeding the observations which the criminal had just made. "But she was doubtless ignorant at the time——"

"Oh! yes—she was ignorant *then* of my accursed fate!" exclaimed Ramsey. "And I was so happy in the enjoyment of her love—and she had consented to fly with me—yes, to leave her husband for my sake——"

"Your amour was deeply tinged with romance, Mr. Ramsey," observed the Prince.

"Ah! it was indeed characterised by extraordinary circumstances," pursued the criminal; "and not the least of all was the fact that this high-born lady, so eminently beautiful and of such impassioned temperament, came a virgin to my arms!"

"A virgin!" echoed the Prince. "I thought you told me she was married to a nobleman who persecuted you on her account."

"And such is indeed the truth," responded Ramsey. "But although she had been married upwards of six years, she was still as innocent, pure, and chaste in body as she was fervid, impassioned, and glowing in mind."

"You astonish me!" exclaimed the Prince. "Do I know this heroine of so strange a history?"

"Your Royal Highness knows her well," answered Ramsey. "But I dare not say more upon the subject——"

"Oh! how cruelly you have piqued my curiosity," exclaimed the Prince. "I would give worlds to know who this lady is! Will you tell me her name? Ten thousand, thousand times do I swear not to betray your confidence—and I shall positively esteem it a favour if you will comply with my request. I never in all my life experienced so vivid an interest in another person's amour as in yours."

"If your Royal Highness commands me to reveal this secret," began Ramsey,—"I have no alternative——"

"Then I *do* command you!" cried the Prince, every lineament of his countenance expressing the most lively curiosity. "Speak—tell me who was this marvellous beauty—this heroine of so romantic a history?"

"But what opinion will your Royal Highness form of *me*, if I betray that noble lady?" said Ramsey, still hesitating.

"It is in the strictest confidence—and no harm can ensue," rejoined the Prince. "Come—tell me quickly—who was she?"

"The Countess of Desborough," answered Ramsey.

"What!—the Countess of Desborough?" exclaimed His Royal Highness, starting up from the sofa as if with the sudden influence of an electric shock. "Is it possible?—the proud, imperious, cruel, and prudish Eleanor of Desborough?"

"I have told your Royal Highness the truth," responded Ramsey, somewhat amazed at the unexpected degree of excitement which the revelation of the noble lady's name had produced upon the Prince.

"You astound me!—I am struck as with a consternation!" continued the heir-apparent, his looks verifying the words which he was uttering. "But, ah! now a light breaks in upon me—you have explained the mystery which enveloped the domestic life of the Earl and Countess of Desborough—the circumstance of their occupying separate chambers ——Yes—I understand it all now—the miserable husband is impotent!"

"That is the tremendous secret of the Desboroughs," observed Ramsey. "But I implore your Royal Highness to place an eternal seal upon your lips——"

"Such an injunction is unnecessary, Mr. Ramsey," interrupted the Prince, still scarcely able to throw off the consternation of amazement which had seized upon him. "And so the brilliant Eleanor was your mistress—your paramour?" he continued in a musing tone. "Well, methinks that you have trained her to a path which she has not since shown

any inexperience or hesitation in pursuing: for the last time I heard of her, was about a month or five weeks ago, when she was in company with a certain Lord Florimel—a baby-faced, beardless, pretty young fellow, who was dressed for the nonce in feminine apparel."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Ramsey, with an accent of bitterness in his voice: then, almost immediately, he added with his usual tone and manner. "But of course I can be nothing to her *now*—unless it be an object of horror and loathing."

The Prince began to pace the room in a thoughtful mood: it was evident that some new idea, engendered by the discourse which had just taken place, was uppermost in his mind;—and he was deliberating how to give expression to it. Ramsey followed him with his eyes; and in the breast of the resuscitated criminal arose a vague suspicion that the heir-apparent longed to break to him some project which he nevertheless knew not precisely how to broach.

At length the Prince stopped short suddenly within a couple of paces of the spot where Ramsey was seated;—and, looking the resuscitated criminal full and even significantly in the face, he said, "Do *you* care for the Countess of Desborough *now*?"

A portion of the truth flashed in an instant to the comprehension of Ramsey: he saw that the heir-apparent had some design relative to the beautiful Countess, and that he wished to make *him* the agent and tool to carry it out.

"I care nothing for her ladyship *now*," was accordingly the reply given by the astute criminal.

"And I suppose that after what I have told you relative to her new amour—with Lord Florimel, I mean," said the Prince, "you would not be particular how you even took a part against her?"

"I should certainly be well pleased to avenge

myself on her for her perfidy towards me," returned Ramsey, the Prince's question itself furnishing the cue to the answer which was sure to be most welcome.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Ramsey," continued the heir-apparent,—"and I will reveal a certain secret to your ears, as you have confided a secret to mine. In a word, I love this haughty, beauteous, and impassioned Countess of Desborough: but she hates me! More than once has she been on the very verge of falling into my arms—and accident has saved her! The measures which I have adopted to ensnare her, have rendered me the object of her aversion. That such is her feeling towards me, I am well assured. To be avenged upon her, then—to gratify my own passion at the same time,—to humble *her*, and appease the desires which boil up like a lava-stream within me whenever I suffer my imagination to gloat upon her image,—*these* are now the aims which I have in view, and which yourself can assist me in carrying into execution."

"I am at the command of your Royal Highness," said Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at thus finding himself taken as it were alike into the confidence and the service of the Prince. "Your Royal Highness can restore *me* to comparative happiness, and at all events to certain security;—and in return I will become your slave, for any purpose—no matter whether of good or of evil."

"You pledge yourself, then, to aid me in the design which I have broached?" said the Prince, his imagination now filled with a thousand voluptuous ideas relative to the beauteous Eleanor of Desborough.

"I pledge myself, body and soul, to the service of your Royal Highness," responded Ramsey.

"Then let this be the compact between us," rejoined the Prince: "that when you, by means of any course of proceeding which you may think fit to adopt, ensure me the enjoyment of both love and vengeance with regard to the Countess of Desborough,—in that same hour, I say, shall the document containing your full pardon be placed in your hands. I will procure it to-morrow—and therefore the sooner you perform *your* part of the agreement, the more cheerfully shall I acquit myself of *mine*."

"Be it so, great Prince," exclaimed Ramsey: "the grass shall not grow under my feet."

The resuscitated criminal then took leave of the heir-apparent, and issued forth from Carlton House, enveloped in the ample cloak, with his hat slouching over his countenance, and holding the silk pocket-handkerchief up to his mouth.

"O haughty, cruel, and imperious Countess of Desborough!" exclaimed the Prince aloud, the moment the door of the apartment had closed behind Philip Ramsey: "the hour of vengeance approaches! Thou shalt yield thyself up to my embraces—I will revel in thy charms—and then, when I have drunk to satiety of the cup of bliss which thou shalt fill for me, I will spurn thee from me as the paramour of a wretch who had passed through the hands of the common hangman! This will be a glorious vengeance, Eleanor—a glorious vengeance!" cried the Prince, rubbing his hands gleefully. "But, ah! the return of that fellow Meagles—and the scrape which this scoundrel Warren has got himself into again,—*these* are occurrences which damp the pleasure that I should otherwise enjoy in such undiluted deliciousness when I think of my passion and my hatred—my love and my spite—my desire and my vengeance, in respect to thee, thou beauteous Eleanor! But let me not suffer gloomy presentiments and evil apprehensions to mar the joy which is in store for me. Meagles is powerless: he can do nothing against me. While *those documents* were within his reach, he could sting me with the venom of a viper: now all the efforts of his malignity will not be more galling than the bite of a gnat. And as for this Warren—well, what does he know?—what can he do?—what can he say? That his wife has been my paramour——Ah! the English public are so accustomed to hear such tales concerning their future King, that they cease to experience surprise—and they know full well that I do not care a damn for their displeasure."

Having arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion, the heir-apparent to the British throne suddenly remembered that the dancing-girl was waiting for him in his own private apartment;—and he accordingly proceeded thither, to gratify in the arms of the Terpsichorean votary those desires which had been so excited by the idea and the hope of speedily possessing the Countess of Desborough.

CHAPTER CLXXXVII.

THE CONVERSATION.

It was on the day following the incidents just related, and at about two o'clock in the afternoon, that we shall find the Duchess of Devonshire alighting from her carriage at the mansion of the Earl and Countess of Desborough in Berkeley Square.

Eleanor was at home: indeed, she was seated alone in the drawing-room at the moment when her friend Georgiana was announced.

"It is quite an age since I have seen you, my dearest Eleanor," said the Duchess, warmly pressing the hand of the charming Countess. "Four or five weeks—and you have been all the time at Stamford Manor——"

"It is indeed five weeks since we last met," observed Eleanor: "and by-the-bye, my dear, Georgiana, I must give you a scolding for the serious manner in which you might have suffered me to be compromised——"

"Oh! I recollect now," exclaimed her Grace, bursting out into as merry a laugh as the restrictions of etiquette would possibly allow. "That affair in Chancery Lane — with Miss Plantagenet——"

"Your scrape-grace cousin Lord Florimel," interrupted the Countess of Desborough, with a rather serious look. "Do you know, Georgiana, that it was too bad of you?"

"My dear friend, there was no opportunity for me to give you a hint—especially before that horrible character Lady Lade——"

"And yet you yourself introduced Lord Florimel to me as Miss Plantagenet," said Eleanor, still preserving a tone of remonstrance; "and I am of

course certain that you were well aware who it really was all the time."

"Yes—but at that moment I did not know that Lady Lade was in the secret," returned the Duchess. "However, I admit that it was imprudent and foolish on my part: but really I did it more as a joke than with any other motive—and you are well aware, dear Eleanor, that I could not have had a sinister or malignant reason with regard to yourself. I love you too well, as my best and dearest friend, to injure a hair of your head," added the generous-hearted though gay, giddy, and profligate Duchess.

"I believe you, Georgiana," said Eleanor, taking her friend's hand and pressing it warmly. "Anything more, then, that I may remark upon the subject will not be in anger: indeed, *that* is a sentiment which I have not entertained all along. It was merely a little annoyance—nothing more. But figure to yourself the embarrassments into which the incident plunged me, when I assure you that, fully believing the beautiful and well-behaved Miss Plantagenet to be precisely what she chose to represent herself, I innocently and ingenuously made her my companion in a visit to the serious-minded, secluded, and retirement-loving Marchioness of Bellenden. The Marchioness, you know, is a particular friend of mine; and I respect as much as I love and esteem her. Not for worlds, then, would I have been the instrument of carrying vexation, scandal, and annoyance into her house. But, behold! some evil spirit must have prompted me to take the false Miss Plantagenet with me to Bellenden Priory on that occasion; and the same unlucky train of circumstances led to the exposure of the cheat——"

"I suppose that the Marchioness of Bellenden was horrified," exclaimed Georgiana, laughing heartily. "But she could not have imagined that you had knowingly and wilfully taken a disguised lover to her house?"

"Fortunately an explanation had already been given showing how Miss Plantagenet—or rather Lord Florimel—became my companion," continued Lady Desborough: "but that explanation had likewise revealed to the Marchioness the fact that the young nobleman had shared Mrs. Fitzherbert's bed at the house in Chancery Lane. Thus, although I was completely exonerated, the reputation of Mrs. Fitzherbert was as totally sacrificed in the esteem of Lady Bellenden."

"But her ladyship, with her retired habits and truly Christian charity, will not make the delicate incident a topic of conversation elsewhere?" observed the Duchess interrogatively.

"Assuredly not," answered the Countess. "Besides, she was too much alarmed at the exposure which took place in her own drawing-room not to be anxious to hush it up as fully as possible. There is a young lady of the name of Foster staying with her; and this charming girl—for lovely and amiable she assuredly is—was once thrown in Lord Florimel's way in some manner that left no very agreeable impression upon her mind. Accordingly, upon entering the room where your scapegrace cousin and myself were seated with the Marchioness, that young lady instantaneously recognised him and proclaimed who he was. His lordship fled from the apartment in a state of confusion and dismay which you can perhaps more readily conceive than I can describe: but in precipitating himself down the stairs—for a headlong flight it assuredly must have been—his foot slipped and he fell with a violent concussion against a porcelain vase or some such ornament. He was taken up senseless—and I am bound to declare that the Marchioness, suddenly forgetting all her resentment, was profoundly afflicted at an accident which we all at first believed to have proved fatal. Without alarming the household, we raised him in our arms—bore him between us into the room whence he had just before fled so precipitately—and bestowed upon him all the attentions which our fears in his behalf could possibly suggest. He rallied in a short time: but it was evident that his reason was temporarily—if not altogether—impaired. Nevertheless, our grief at the accident was mitigated on finding that it had not proved fatal upon the spot."

"And then, I suppose, came the question of what you were to do with him?" said the Duchess of Devonshire inquiringly.

"Precisely so," responded Eleanor. "The Marchioness began to perceive all the inconvenience and the probable scandal that might arise from giving the injured nobleman an asylum beneath her roof;—and it was therefore suggested by myself that his lordship should be removed as speedily and also as privately as possible to his own residence in Piccadilly. But then arose the embarrassing question, how was he to be conveyed thither? If I took him in my carriage, his servants would naturally conceive the most injurious suspicions relative to myself;—and if the Marchioness sent him in her own carriage, her own domestics accompanying the vehicle could not fail to learn who the disguised invalid was. In either case the most unpleasant impressions would be made concerning the Marchioness or myself."

"It was indeed a bewildering affair—a perfect dilemma," observed the Duchess of Devonshire. "And how did you extricate yourselves from the difficulty at last?"

"The Marchioness resolved to take two of her servants into her confidence and explain to them that the young nobleman, after assuming female apparel in pursuance of some silly freak, had imposed alike upon herself and me. In fine," added the Countess of Desborough, "Lady Bellenden bade me return home and leave her to manage the affair in the best way she could. I called upon her next day and found that she had contrived to extricate herself from the perplexity in a way sufficiently satisfactory to herself: for in order that Lord Florimel's domestics should not ascertain at whose house their master had met with the accident while disguised in female apparel, the Marchioness had him removed to the abode of her own medical man, to whom she sent a note explaining the circumstances of the case."

"Admirably contrived!" exclaimed the Duchess. "I presume that you are aware that the young scapegrace has quitted London for a few weeks and repaired to the sea-side?"

"No—I had not learnt this circumstance," observed Eleanor. "I suppose that, on recovering from the effects of the accident, he was recommended to seek a change of air?"

"Something of that kind does he tell me in a note which I received from him a few days ago,

and which is dated from Dover," said the Duchess. "He states that a slight injury which he had sustained from a fall compelled him to repair to the sea-side to recruit his strength. Have you seen your friend the Marchioness of Bellenden lately?" inquired the Duchess, merely for the sake of continuing the discourse, in which there was a sudden pause after the previous observation.

"No—the Marchioness has left London for a short time," returned Eleanor. "I believe that her law-suit which is now verging upon its close, has compelled her to visit some provincial places where she expects to glean valuable information in aid of her cause. But I remember," added the Countess, laughing, "that I was to give you a scolding, Georgiana, for wilfully and wickedly placing me in such an awkward predicament with your scapegrace cousin."

"My dearest friend," exclaimed the Duchess, likewise smiling, but rather with a sly significancy than a positive gaiety, "if you never find yourself in a more perplexing or perilous dilemma than that one, you will indeed have reason to congratulate your good fortunes. The romantic adventure in which you were involved with my cousin Gabriel is nothing when compared with an incident that happened to me some time ago at the very country-seat which you have lately purchased."

"What! at Stamford Manor do you mean?" cried the Lady Desborough. "I never heard of your being there."

"And yet I passed a night within its walls about eight or ten weeks ago," continued the Duchess: "and I had a companion with me—one of the handsomest gallants of the age——"

"Ah! a light breaks in upon me!" interrupted Eleanor. "But is it possible that you were the lady who visited the Manor one evening with the Prince?"

"Such is the fact, my dear friend," responded the Duchess, smiling. "I do not fear to make you my confidant. Indeed, I have already confessed to you, upon a previous occasion, that there has existed a certain intimacy between myself and his Royal Highness—whom, by the bye, I have ceased to look upon with any favourable sentiment since his cruel and heartless conduct to our poor friend Fitzherbert. But how came you to learn that the Prince and a lady passed the night at Stamford Manor?"

"From the old couple who were in charge of the house when the Earl and myself first went to inspect it," answered the Countess. "They were full of the visit which his Royal Highness paid the Manor; and I can assure you, my dear Georgiana, that they were not sparing in the compliments which they lavished upon your beauty."

"I am much obliged to them," said the magnificent Duchess, smiling complacently as she turned her head for a moment to catch a glimpse of her splendid countenance in the nearest mirror. "But I hope that they did not suspect who I was?" she observed, with a sudden manifestation of anxiety.

"They entertained not the faintest idea of the truth in that respect," answered the Countess. "But how came you to incur the risk of so seriously compromising yourself?"

"I will narrate to you the whole adventure, my dear Eleanor, returned the Duchess; "and you will then see that there was one little episode in it far more perplexing, extraordinary, and romantic than your affair with the disguised Lord Florimel. But, by the bye," exclaimed Georgiana, as the sudden thought struck her, "did that worthy old couple at Stamford Manor ever tell you anything relative to a ghost which was alleged to have been seen at the house on the very evening of the visit of his Royal Highness and myself?"

"A ghost!" ejaculated the Countess, laughing. "No—I never was favoured with any tale of that nature. But I recollect, now you mention the circumstance, that old Mrs. Bryan one day commenced an anecdote of the kind in the presence of the Earl and myself; and his lordship cut her short by a request that no silly narratives of apparitions might ever be circulated in his household. I was therefore deprived of the exciting pleasure of hearing Mrs. Bryan's ghost story," added the beauteous Eleanor, still smiling gaily.

"Then you shall enjoy that pleasure now, my dear friend," rejoined the Duchess of Devonshire, continuing the discourse in the same semi-jocular and chatty strain. "But first I must tell you how the Prince and myself happened to be benighted and to take refuge at Stamford Manor. Some weeks ago I let you into the secret of all that had occurred relative to poor Octavia Clarendon. Well, you know that when she suddenly lost the use of her reason on visiting the Prince at Carlton House, his Royal Highness sent for me and I conveyed her to my villa in Buckinghamshire. The Prince, being greatly alarmed on her account, and feeling uneasy lest proper precautions should not be adopted to prevent her from escaping and making her wrongs public, followed me next morning to the villa. There he passed the rest of that day—but without seeing Octavia, whom I had already placed under the care of the discreet and trustworthy Dr. Clarges. Having assured himself that every necessary measure had been adopted to meet the distressing emergency, the Prince resolved to return to town in the evening; and he insisted that I should become his travelling-companion. As we were passing along the road in the vicinage of Stamford Manor, the carriage broke down: and, having learnt from a peasant who was journeying that way at the moment, that we might no doubt obtain an asylum at the Manor, which was merely occupied by an old couple charged with the care of it, the Prince persuaded me to act upon the suggestion. The Prince's servants were accordingly left to patch up the carriage as well as they could and take it back to Aylesbury, with instructions to get it repaired during the night and call for us early in the morning at the Manor. A short walk brought us to the front door of that mansion; and an asylum did we accordingly obtain. Now it happened that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page were there at the time, on business connected with Sir Richard Stamford; and of this Mr. Page the Prince had some knowledge. In the course of conversation Mr. Page related to us that very ghost-story with which Mrs. Bryan was no doubt anxious to regale your ears when the Earl, as you just now informed me, cut short her old-womanish garrulity. The substance of the story was that while Mr. and Mrs. Page were occupied in the library of the mansion, they were suddenly visited by the apparition of that notorious criminal,

Philip Ramsey—the Aylesbury banker—who was hanged——"

The Countess of Desborough gave a convulsive start—while a ghastly, a hideous pallor seized upon her countenance: but her lips, that had suddenly become of an ashy hue, were compressed with a clenching tightness, as if to keep back the scream that rose to the very tip of her tongue.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, literally bounding from her seat and catching her friend by the hand. "What ails you, my dearest Eleanor?—what ails you?"

"Nothing—a transitory indisposition—but it is gone," faultered the Countess, with a superhuman struggle to stifle the menaced outburst of agonised feelings which naturally accompanied the torturing reminiscences so abruptly awakened in her soul. "Pray proceed, Georgiana—pray proceed," she murmured, with quivering lip, while her whole frame still trembled like an aspen-leaf.

"Eleanor, in the name of all our friendship, what means this emotion?" demanded the Duchess. "You are not a child to be terrified by a ghost-story, which in the sequel will prove to have been nothing supernatural after all;—and you have *not* been seized with the sudden indisposition which you alleged as the means of tranquillising my fears concerning you. Tell me, then—tell me——"

"Oh! my beloved friend," exclaimed the Countess, now bursting into that flood of anguished weeping which would no longer be restrained; "I am very, very unhappy!"—and she threw herself upon the bosom of the Duchess.

"Compose your feelings, Eleanor—give not way to this dreadful grief!" said the generous-hearted Georgiana, in a tone of the most tender solace. "There! let me wipe those streaming eyes, as if I were your sister—for you know that I love you as well as if you were my sister. Giddy, dissipated, frail as I may be, Eleanor," added the Duchess in a voice full of a touching pathos, "I entertain nothing but the kindest feelings towards you."

"I know it, Georgiana—I know it," murmured the unhappy Countess, embracing her friend with the warmth of deepest gratitude: then, disengaging herself gently from Georgiana's arms, she wiped the tears from her countenance, saying in a firmer tone, "Yes—I am unhappy—very unhappy: but the time has now come,—accident has pointed it out—circumstances have indicated it,—when I must make a confidant of you."

"What! have you other secrets that weigh upon your mind, my poor Eleanor, in addition to the *one* tremendous sorrow that you revealed to me a few months ago?"—and the looks of the Duchess, as she thus spoke, were full of mingled sympathy and curiosity.

"Oh! yes—I have *other* secrets of a fearful nature—secrets which at times convulse my heart with a mortal anguish," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, in a tone of concentrated bitterness. "But proceed with *your* narrative first, my dear Georgiana: tell me all that you have to narrate—and then I will pour forth my sorrows into your sympathising bosom."

"But wherefore ask me to return to a history which has become dull and even absurd in comparison with the tale of those afflictions which I am so anxious to hear from your lips?" demanded Georgiana.

"I have my reasons for the request which I have just made," responded Eleanor. "Continue your narrative, then, my dear friend—omit not a single detail—abridge not one particular;—and you will presently comprehend the motives which influence me in beseeching this favour at your hands."

"Be it as you say, Eleanor," remarked the Duchess, utterly at a loss to imagine how the history of her adventures at Stamford Manor could have any possible connexion with the woes of her friend.

By this time the Countess had regained a certain tranquillity of demeanour,—although the colour still remained absent from her cheeks of delicate olive complexion, and her bosom was every now and then convulsed with a stifled sob.

CHAPTER CLXXXVIII.

THE BED-ROOM SCENE AT STAMFORD MANOR.

"I was telling you, my dear Eleanor," continued the Duchess of Devonshire, "that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page whom we found at the Manor, were full of the belief that they had seen the apparition of Philip Ramsey, the Aylesbury banker, who suffered the extreme penalty of the law some months ago at Newgate. Of course neither his Royal Highness nor myself put any faith in the tale,—ascribing the circumstance to the fevered or perhaps affrighted imaginations of two persons in whose minds the awful tragedy connected with the Manor was doubtless uppermost. Mr. Page, who possessed an inordinate love of hearing himself talk, entered elaborately upon the alleged occurrence, and even described with peculiar minuteness every feature of Ramsey's countenance. He, indeed, was one of the witnesses against that person—or at all events in some manner instrumental in bringing him to justice,—and he therefore knew his personal appearance well. It seemed that Ramsey was a very handsome young man, as the newspapers reported at the time: he was eight-and-twenty—tall and well-made—with a Grecian countenance—fine dark eyes—splendid teeth—and an olive complexion, a little more dusky than your own, dear Eleanor."

"Go on, Georgiana—go on," said the Countess, with the petulance of a nervousness torturingly poignant.

"This Mr. Page of whom I have been speaking," continued the Duchess, "not only described Ramsey's appearance with the minuteness arising from a personal knowledge of the man—but he likewise produced a portrait of the original."

"A portrait?" ejaculated Eleanor, to whose mind flashed the incident of *that* picture which was painted by George Woodfall, and the exhibition of which had revealed simultaneously to her husband and herself the real name and character of the guest whom *he* was entertaining and *she* was loving as Gustavus Wakefield.

"Yes — a miniature portrait," returned the Duchess, in answer to Lady Desborough's ejaculatory question. "It appeared that some one had found it between the mattresses in a bed-room; and it is therefore probable that the picture had been given by the criminal to Lady Stamford, who, you may remember, was his paramour. The

Prince and myself both examined the portrait; and it corresponded in every respect with the description which Mr. Page had previously given of Philip Ramsey. '*What a handsome young man he must have been!*' thought I to myself at the time; and I remember remarking that the noblest instead of the guiltiest feelings appeared to be stamped upon his brow. But how profoundly you sighed at that moment, Eleanor?—and now the colour is coming and going upon your cheeks a dozen times in a moment?"

"Do not heed my looks—nor regard my manner," said the Countess. "You shall know all presently—and then you will understand everything which now appears mysterious and unaccountable in my conduct. Proceed, dearest Georgiana—proceed, I implore you."

"I am now approaching the grand climax in my narrative," resumed the Duchess of Devonshire, after gazing for a few moments upon her friend with an expression of earnest curiosity and deep interest. "Having duly examined the miniature portrait and passed our observations upon it, his Royal Highness and myself retired to the chamber which had been prepared for our reception. It was the second room on the left-hand side of the long corridor——"

"The very chamber in which, as I have been told, Lady Stamford breathed her last," interjected the Countess of Desborough. "It has a dressing-room opening from one extremity, and a bath-room from the other."

"The same," rejoined the Duchess. "Well, to that apartment were we escorted by Mrs. Page, whose proffered services I rejected: for there was something bold, forward, and coarse in the woman's manner which I did not at all admire. I accordingly dismissed her at once; and the Prince retired to the dressing-room while I performed my own unaided night-toilette in the bed-chamber. Presently his Royal Highness re-appeared in a dressing-gown which Mr. Page's attention had doubtless provided; and he began to pay me some of those honied compliments which he knows so well how to lavish upon his favourites, when a strange noise startled us abruptly. We listened—the door of the bath-room opened—and a man appeared upon the threshold. Great heavens! what did I see? One glance was sufficient—a scream burst from my lips—and I threw myself into the arms of the Prince;—for the countenance which had just met my affrighted looks was that which the miniature had already so faithfully impressed upon my memory! In a word, the criminal Philip Ramsey was *there*—in that chamber—before the eyes of myself and his Royal Highness."

"The criminal Philip Ramsey!" murmured Eleanor, mechanically repeating the words which the Duchess had already used so frequently in the course of her narrative, and the mention of which pierced each time like a dagger into the heart and passed like a searing-iron over the brain of the wretched Lady Desborough.

"What is it that distresses you thus profoundly, my dearest friend?" inquired Georgiana. "Is it possible that Mr. Ramsey was known to you—that you experienced any interest in his behalf——"

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed Eleanor, almost wildly. "I again implore you not to question me until your narrative is concluded. It is cruel—oh! it is cruel to force me to renew the same prayer so often."

"I would not wilfully afflict you, Eleanor," said the Duchess, in a tone of gentle remonstrance;—"and therefore your reproof is undeserved. But so long as I remain ignorant of the cause of your sorrow, I am unable to regulate the terms of my narrative in such a manner as to avoid touching that tensely drawn chord which evidently vibrates to your very heart's core."

"Pardon me, dear Georgiana, for any hasty or unkind expression on my part," said the Countess, pressing her friend's hand to her lips,—"and continue your history without reference to the emotions which it excites in my bosom. You were telling me how *he*—Philip Ramsey,"—and the beauteous Eleanor pronounced the name with a shudder,—"appeared to yourself and the Prince upon the threshold of the bath-room. What followed next?"

"His Royal Highness," resumed Georgiana, "was as profoundly and as fully struck as I was by the marvellous resemblance which the individual bore to the miniature we had previously seen: but, almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, the Prince demanded of the intruder who he was. Then the wretched man fell at our feet and made to us the astounding revelation that he was indeed none other than the self-same Philip Ramsey whom all the world believed to have suffered death for his crimes. In deep, low, but earnest whispers—as if he were afraid that even the very echoes would thunder forth his name and the circumstances of his resuscitation—did he explain enough to convince us that he was no impostor in a drama where imposture would have been so wondrous. No—he was not deceiving us: he was the real, identical Philip Ramsey who had been the subject of Page's fears and of our discourse that very evening. Sharply, angrily, and suspiciously did the Prince question him,—but also speaking in a low and subdued tone;—while I, bewildered and amazed, and feeling as if I were walking in a dream, had scarcely presence of mind sufficient to wrap around me the shawl which his Royal Highness threw over my half-naked form. At length I also began to question the miserable being who had fallen upon his knees before us;—but my queries were swayed by a profound terror which I could not control. There was something dreadful in finding oneself face to face with a man who had risen as it were from the grave—who had passed through the hands of the public executioner—whose body had been folded in the embrace of Death—and who was nevertheless *there*, a living, breathing, moving, sentient being still!"

"Horror! horror!" groaned Eleanor, clasping her hands together, while her countenance became more ghastly in its unearthly pallor than even when the first mention of Ramsey's name on this occasion had chased all the vital colouring from beneath the pure bistre shade of her transparent skin. "But go on—go on, Georgiana!" she exclaimed suddenly, and with a tremendous effort to subdue the agonising emotions that were raging in her breast.

"I see that I must make as speedy an end of my narrative as possible," said the Duchess of Devonshire, whose curiosity and surprise were enhanced to an almost intolerable degree. "The conversa-

tion which took place between the resuscitated criminal on the one hand and the Prince and myself on the other, was fraught with a fearful—a terrible interest. He explained to us in a few rapid but awfully thrilling words how he had been handed over to a surgeon for dissection—how the vital spark had flickered and flamed up again—how he had fled from the abode of the medical man—and how he had found an asylum in some place which he would not name. Then he informed us that a feeling of morbid curiosity had induced him to revisit the scene of his fatal amour with the self-murdered wife of Sir Richard Stamford,—and he said that, having perceived the startling effect which his appearance in the library had produced upon the Pages, he had sought refuge in the bed-chamber where Lady Stamford had surrendered up her breath. There it was his intention to remain until all was quiet in the house, when he proposed to steal forth and take his departure thence. For, well aware of the influence of superstitious fears upon the mind, he fancied that of *all* the rooms in the Manor *that* in which the deceased lady died was the very one which would be the last to be used by the inmates of the dwelling. It likewise appeared that when he suddenly heard the door open and persons enter that apartment,—meaning the Prince and myself, escorted by Mrs. Page,—he had only just time to conceal himself in the bath-room; — and when he found that the chamber was to be occupied for the night, he had resolved to come forth and throw himself upon our mercy. Such was the substance of his explanations;—and when they were completed, the Prince commanded him to leave the room at once. Then did a sudden change come over the man's countenance;—and he said, with a malicious significancy, '*From the conversation which I have ere now overheard, I learnt who this lady is,*'—pointing to me; —'*and if I experience harsh treatment at your hands, all England shall know that the Duchess of Devonshire passed the night at Stamford Manor with the Prince of Wales.*'—This announcement convinced his Royal Highness in a moment that, for *my* sake even more than his own, was it requisite to come to terms with the resuscitated criminal; and the Prince accordingly adopted a more conciliatory tone and demeanour towards him. In fine, he exacted a pledge from his Royal Highness that when a suitable opportunity should occur, and a sufficient interval should have elapsed for the impression of his crimes to have subsided in the public mind, the Prince would use his influence in the proper quarter to obtain for him a full pardon. These conditions, which Ramsey imposed, were assented to by the Prince;—and the resuscitated then took his departure. We must suppose that he escaped without notice or molestation from the house, inasmuch as on the following morning no sign nor word on the part of the Pages afforded the least ground for suspecting the contrary was the case. The Prince's private travelling-carriage came to fetch us at the hour commanded on the preceding night;—and thus ended the romantic adventure of Stamford Manor."

There was a long pause, during which the Countess of Desborough remained absorbed in the deepest reverie. She was rent by two antagonistic feelings, — the one prompting her to disburden her mind without delay of the tremendous secret that lay upon it like a weight of lead—the other urging her to conceal her amour with Ramsey as if it were a flagrant and damning crime which she had committed. But when she thought how sweet —Oh! how sweet it would be to receive sympathy from the lips of a dear and valued friend,—when she likewise reflected that the secret would be perfectly safe in the keeping of that friend,—and when she remembered how often she had felt the pining want of a confidant into whose bosom she could pour forth the flood of her woes now so painfully pent-up in her overcharged breast,—she resolved to hesitate no longer.

"My dear Georgiana," she said, taking the hand of the Duchess, in whose countenance she looked with a mingled expression of shame and affliction, wounded pride and despair,—"you will pity me—Oh! you will pity me, when you learn the sad truth which I have now to reveal. *Your* narrative was romantic and strange: *mine* is fraught with a wild and terrible interest. For it was in this house that Philip Ramsey found an asylum—and I—my God! —I became his victim? Now do you comprehend me?"

And the corrugated eye-brows, quivering lips, and convulsing bosom of the wretched Lady Desborough evinced the most ineffable anguish.

"Great heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed the Duchess, totally unprepared for so tremendous a revelation.

"It is possible!—it has happened!—it is true!" cried the Countess, in a voice of despair;—"and what is worse—Oh! ten thousand times worse—my husband is acquainted with the whole hideous circumstances!"

"Unhappy Eleanor!" exclaimed the Duchess: then, throwing her arms round her friend's neck, the generous-hearted Georgiana said all she could to comfort her.

"Ah! I was not wrong when I trusted in your friendship," sobbed the Countess, as she wept bitterly upon the bosom of the Duchess. "I knew that you would not despise me for my misfortune —that you would not loathe me on account of this crowning infamy which has become my wretched, wretched fate! No—no—you can feel for me—you can sympathise with me—you can console me! The secret of my married life was already revealed to you; and you were aware that I was pure and chaste in body, though my imagination was foul and corrupt with the cravings, and longings, and furious desires that were devouring me. Then came that man,—came at a time when all the fiercest wants of my nature had been aggravated into the famished yearnings of the strongest sensuality, by the tantalising and unaccomplished wooings of the Prince. The man came, I say,—came under a fictitious name, and with a plausible tale of suffering, and friendlessness, and sorrow upon his tongue. I pitied him:—he became our guest—we were thrown much together—and you can judge, because you have seen him, whether his masculine beauty was not well—too well calculated to win my heart. In a short time—yes, even in a few days—I loved him to madness—to distraction; and I surrendered myself full willingly—Oh! *too* willingly to his arms. For a brief space did this delicious dream of paradise endure—and then it was suddenly dissipated by the rudest storm that ever broke with appalling violence upon the calm still-

ness of a summer's eve. An artist whom my husband had patronised brought a picture to exhibit —and that picture was the portrait of Philip Ramsey! Oh! what words can be found to describe the agony that seized upon me all in a moment? The collected tortures of ten thousand racks would have been a comparative elysium. How I survived that terrible day, I know not!"

"And what followed?" inquired the Duchess, profoundly interested in this strange narrative.

"Ramsey's immediate exile to America—and my husband's forgiveness generously vouchsafed towards myself," responded the Countess of Desborough.

"And do you love him still—I mean *that man?*" asked the Duchess.

"Love him!" cried Eleanor, with the sudden start and changing manner of a disdainful astonishment: then with the words hissing through her ashy lips, she added in a tone of indescribable bitterness, amounting almost to a ferocious hatred, "I abhor and detest him."

"And since he quitted England you have heard nothing of him?—he has not sought to communicate with you?" said the Duchess, inquiringly.

"God forbid?" ejaculated Eleanor. "I hope he is dead—and yet I am not naturally ungenerous nor cruelly inclined."

"You will pardon me for asking one more question," said Georgiana, with some little degree of hesitation. "Have you not endeavoured to console yourself with another lover?"

"No—on my soul *no!*" exclaimed the Countess, the blood now rushing back to her cheeks. "There was a time," she continued more calmly and slowly, "when I experienced towards my husband sentiments that bordered even upon aversion: but if he were guilty of a wrong towards me in making me his wife, the outrage which my amour constituted towards himself was ten thousand times more flagrant. Our positions therefore changed; and instead of it being for *me* to pardon, 'twas for me to implore *his* forgiveness. And that forgiveness he gave even before it was sought: spontaneously it flowed from his really generous and lofty soul. Think you, then, Georgiana, that I am ungrateful for such conduct as this?—think you that I would prove an ingrate for so much noble-mindedness evinced towards myself? No—Oh! no—it were impossible! I have learnt to restrain my desires —to put a curb upon the longings of an ardent temperament—and to do my duty as a wife. Therefore was it that I felt annoyed and vexed when your thoughtlessness might have so seriously compromised me with Lord Florimel."

"But was it not strange that the Earl should have become the purchaser of Stamford Manor?" inquired the Duchess,—"knowing, as he must have done, that it was a scene so peculiarly associated with the misdeeds of Philip Ramsey?"

"He was already in treaty for the property before the tremendous exposure took place," answered the Countess: "and he had even paid a deposit as an earnest of the bargain. After the fatal discovery, he consulted me upon the subject, and offered to forego the transaction. But I was anxious to give him a proof of that strength of mind which should regulate and influence my future actions; and I therefore not only urged him to complete the business, but so soon as it was concluded I was the first to propose that we should visit our new property."

In this manner did the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough continue to discourse upon the various subjects that engrossed their interest;—and after having remained for nearly three hours with her friend, the brilliant Georgiana took her leave.

Not ten minutes had elapsed from the moment that her Grace's carriage drove away from the door, when a servant entered the apartment, bearing a letter. Having presented it to the Countess, the footman retired, and Eleanor, whom the incident had aroused from a reverie of deep and painful thought, glanced at the superscription.

Were it possible for an arrow suddenly to traverse the brain, inflicting only a poignant torture without killing its victim upon the spot, we might readily conceive its effect to be that which the first glimpse of the handwriting of this letter's address produced upon Lady Desborough. She started violently—she was thrilled with the spasm of a mortal terror that shot through her entire frame from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

Then, as if suspense were worse than even the realization of the appalling suspicion that had flashed up into vivid vitality in her mind, she tore the letter frantically open. But one glance at its contents was sufficient: her fingers relaxed their hold upon the paper—her brain was seized with a sudden reeling—her sight became dizzy—and, covering her face with her hands, she groaned murmuringly, "My God! my God! what will become of me?"

CHAPTER CLXXXIX.

THE REUNITED FRIENDS.

We must now introduce our readers to the abode of Lady Lade in King Street, St. James's.

It was in the evening of the same day on which the incidents just related took place, and the Amazon was seated in her dining-room, with her old friend and paramour Tim Meagles. The dessert and wine were upon the table: but they remained almost entirely untouched—for the couple, thus reunited, were fully absorbed in the discussion of the many topics which interested them.

The beautiful huntress was now apparelled in widow's weeds. Her magnificent hair no longer fell in a thousand ringlets over her shoulders: it was arranged in the simple style suitable to her mourning garb, and was nearly altogether concealed by the snowy cap which she was compelled to wear. The sable dress set off her fine shape to a somewhat less advantage than the male attire which was wont to develop her well-formed limbs in a manner so comparatively undisguised and exciting: but still the admirer of the sex who had never seen her in her Amazonian garb, would not have been very willing to admit that she could possibly have improved by any change of raiment that appearance which she presented in her costume of widowhood. For the fashion of the day allowed the body of the dress to be so low and open in front that it revealed the luxuriant richness of that bust which the tight-fitting frock-coat had con-

THE MARCHIONESS OF BELLENDEN.

cealed altogether; and those who were wont to admire the superb slope of her shoulders, could now contemplate their dazzling whiteness into the bargain.

Although the impressions were still fresh and vivid which had been made upon her by Sir John Lade's sudden death, and which had fastened upon her mind when the tidings of that event were conveyed to her in the sponging-house,—and although her present discourse with Tim Meagles was of a grave and serious nature,—yet was there a certain roguish archness in the expression of her features which contrasted singularly enough with the mourning cap that imprisoned her handsome countenance. This charming wickedness of look had become so habitual to her that she could not possibly divest herself of it, even if she had tried: it flashed from her magnificent dark eyes—glowed upon her carnation cheeks—and shone in the half-smile that no seriousness of thought or circumstance could banish completely from her full red lips.

Her friend and companion Tim Meagles was but little altered in personal appearance; his countenance was slightly weather-beaten—and that was the only visible effect his voyage had produced upon him. He was dressed in precisely the same dashing style which has already been made so familiar to our readers,—the sporting coat, the white corduroys, the lapping waistcoat, and the top-boots. His auburn whiskers were as well curled as ever, and perhaps a trifle larger; and his bright red hair was parted with that studied negligence which threw its wavy masses up in such a manner as to give an advantageous elongation to the appearance of the head. His linen was scrupulously clean: his neckerchief was tied with characteristic fastidiousness;—and across his hat upon the sideboard lay the almost inseparable riding-whip.

But the countenance of Tim Meagles wore a

gravity of expression that might almost be termed ominous. Nor was this to be wondered at: for on arriving in London on the previous evening, he had received from Letitia Lade a full account of all that had transpired during his absence. She had told him how she had discovered that the Prince was the author of his expatriation, and how his lodgings had been ransacked and the important documents taken away: she freely explained to him how she had visited his Royal Highness and become the partner of his bed in order to regain possession of the papers;—and she likewise made him acquainted with the manner in which the heir-apparent had once more recovered those documents, and how he had warned and menaced herself with regard to the consequences of any future molestation which she might offer him.

Already smarting under the cruel and ingrate treatment which he had received from the Prince, and arriving in London with a burning desire for revenge, Meagles was not likely to feel his spirits raised by the details of Lady Lade's narrative. He had built his plans upon the hope of finding the papers secure and safe in the possession of the Amazon, whom he knew to be well aware of the place where he was wont to keep them at his lodgings: but this hope was destroyed by the recital which, on his return to London, he heard from her lips.

This narrative, as we have above stated, was given on the evening previous to that on which we now introduce our readers to Lady Letitia's abode. Meagles had returned to his lodgings in Jermyn Street, where Mrs. Piggleberry went into hysterics of joy at beholding him again. Her first floor had never been let since he was forced to leave England; and he therefore resumed possession of the apartments. His property was all safe in Mrs. Piggleberry's care: the Amazon had taken charge of his horses during his absence;—and the volatile Wasp, who was likewise rejoiced to welcome his master safe back again, returned to his service. Lady Lade's purse was open to him;—and thus in many respects we find our friend Tim restored to the same position which he occupied when the Prince's treachery sent him all on a sudden out of the country.

During the morning after the night of his arrival in London, he had called at the lodgings which Melmoth and his family occupied in Westminster when he first knew them: but the faint hope that he had entertained of hearing some tidings in that quarter relative to the fate of the working-man, his wife, and children, was disappointed. He was therefore ignorant whether Melmoth had succeeded in effecting his escape on that memorable night when he committed himself to the mercy of the Thames off Woolwich, or whether he had perished in the endeavour to avoid expatriation. He had likewise called at Mrs. Brace's establishment in Pall Mall to make inquiries concerning Rose Foster, whose image had ever remained uppermost in his mind: but his queries experienced naught save abrupt and cold negatives. Then, in the afternoon, he had repaired to the abode of Lady Lade, with whom he had promised to dine;—and we therefore now behold the reunited couple sitting together over the almost untasted dessert, and discussing the various topics arising from past occurrences, especially those which the Amazon's history of the preceding evening had developed.

"And thus," observed Meagles, after a long pause, "every one of our grand hopes has been knocked down and annihilated."

"It would seem so, Tim," replied the widow: then, smiling outright for the first time that evening, she said archly, "Fate has determined that you are not to be a Duke, and that I am therefore never to be a Duchess."

"And all through the accursed treachery, ingratitude, and perfidy of that scoundrel Prince," added Meagles, bitterly.

"Is your rancour so absorbing that you could not even give me some other hope, Tim," said Lady Lady, the sunny smile still lingering upon her lips,—"even though you cannot make me a Duchess?"

"My dear Letitia, you are an excellent friend to me," answered Meagles; "and I ought to do anything and everything I can to please you. But you will admit that neither of us can be in a humour to discuss future plans, unless it be the mode of carrying out that vengeance which we are both determined to wreak upon the Prince."

"And yet you must give me one assurance, Tim," said the widow, looking absolutely enchanting as she spoke. "I intend to wear this garb," she added, glancing down at her mourning dress, "precisely one year, as a mark of respect to the memory of a man who was too good to such a worthless, ungrateful wife as I proved towards him. But at the expiration of that time——"

"You and I will be made one," responded Meagles, touched by the devotion of this woman who was rich and independent, but who with all her faults remained faithful to her affection for him, altered though his prospects were.

"That assurance is all that I require, Tim," she observed: "and in the meantime I intend that we shall be upon the best possible behaviour with regard to each other—excellent friends, and nothing more. Now, you understand what I mean," she added, with an arch smile and a deepening of the carnation upon her cheeks. "I am a singular, wayward, eccentric creature; and I have resolved to remain more faithful to Sir John's memory for a year after his death, than ever I was during any one single week of his life-time. That is my phantasy: or rather, it is my way of showing as much gratitude as I can for all the kindnesses he heaped upon me. Perhaps there is also a slight tinge of remorse in the matter——But never mind!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, while a tear glistened in her eye, like a rain-drop upon a sloe in the sun-shine. "You comprehend my meaning—and it shall be an agreement between us, Tim—shall it not?"

"To be sure, my beauty—since you wish it," returned Meagles, patting the cheek down which that pearly tear was now slowly tracing its way like another rain-drop over a peach of the deepest vermeil dye.

"Now, is this the way you commence the performance of your part of the agreement?" she exclaimed, laughing with something like that joyousness of tone which used to sound like a blythe harmony in Meagles' ears. "But I am really serious, Tim," she observed, her manner suddenly becoming grave, and even determined: "and

therefore nothing more than a kiss at meeting and another at parting until the expiration of the year. And then——"

"And then—what?" asked Meagles, recovering somewhat of his own former gaiety, as he looked with a sly significance into the depths of the widow's splendid black eyes.

"And then—anything you choose," she answered, drawing back her chair to avoid another patting of the cheek which her companion seemed inclined to bestow upon her.

"Well, my beauty," he said, laughing, "you shall rule me in all things: for, as I just now observed, you have been a good and kind friend to me—and absence has not made you forget me."

And as Meagles gave utterance to these words, he inwardly vowed to renounce all idea of seeking any more after Rose Foster: for he could not feel otherwise than touched by the conduct of Lady Lade towards him. Nevertheless, as he came to that resolve, he could not help heaving a sigh at the sacrifice he was thus making to a sense of gratitude: for he had never experienced towards the Amazon any other feeling than that of friendship mingled with the attachment which belongs to a sensual fruition.

"You sigh, Tim," she observed. "Have you anything upon your mind with which I am unacquainted?"

"Nothing, I can assure you," he exclaimed, suddenly forcing himself to seem cheerful. "But all these matters with which you *are* acquainted, are enough to drive a fellow wild with vexation. To think that some few months ago—weeks I may say—the Prince was so completely in our power;—and now he is thoroughly out of our clutches. Because all the secrets which we know of, are useless as weapons to wield against him, without the documentary evidence to support the verbal assertion of those facts."

"What course, then, do you propose to adopt?" inquired the Amazon: "for revenged upon him we *must* and *will* be, even if we gain no really solid and substantial advantage. What do you think of making use of the Marquis of Saint Croix, who, as I told you last night, cannot obtain a single shilling from the Prince, and who has been dunning him, at my instigation, for some weeks past?"

"But how can we make any use of him beyond what you have already done in that respect?" asked Meagles.

"Persuade him to publish a pamphlet containing a full statement of his case," replied the widow.

"Well, we may do *that*," said her companion: "but I want a far more substantial revenge—a revenge which shall proceed *directly*, and not *indirectly* from ourselves, and which the Prince nevertheless could not adopt as a pretext for punishing us."

"Watch all his movements, Tim," suggested Lady Lade; "and depend upon it, you will find him out in some prank the circumstances of which we may turn to our own purposes. Who knows but that we might once more get him into our power?"

"True! The advice is excellent," observed Meagles. "From what you told me last night and from the inquiries which I was enabled to make this morning, it is pretty clear that he and his wife, the Princess, are already on queer terms with each other. Such at least is the current rumour, founded on little incidents that have oozed out even from the innermost privacy of Carlton House;—and the report is pretty well confirmed by what a friend of mine who is connected with the Opera, and whom I accidently met this morning, confidentially whispered in my ear."

"To what effect was his communication?" inquired the widow.

"That the Prince had three of the new dancing-girls at Carlton House last night," returned Meagles; "and one of them remained with him until the morning. It is therefore pretty evident that he is still pursuing the old game."

"And hence the greater encouragement for you to adopt the course which I have suggested, and keep a watch upon his movements and proceedings so far as you can," observed Lady Lade. "You are so well acquainted with his habits and pursuits—the faces of all the frequenters of Carlton House are so familiar to you—and you are so quick at drawing the most important deductions from the slightest incidents, that you could scarcely fail to discover, sooner or later, something that may be turned to our advantage. What do you really think of my suggestion?"

"The longer I reflect upon it, the better I am pleased with it," rejoined Meagles. "Come, we will give up moping and desponding, Letitia," he exclaimed, a sudden brightness overspreading his countenance; "and we will drink success to our schemes. Here, my beauty—pledge me in a bumper."

And Meagles, having filled two glasses with claret, handed one to his fair companion.

"Well, I cannot refuse to pledge you in that toast, Tim," she observed, with a smile;—and the next moment her empty glass was set down upon the table.

"Now perhaps you will take a weed, my harum-scarum?" said Meagles, presenting his cigar-case.

"No—not until my year's mourning shall have expired, Tim," answered the widow. "You must tempt me into nothing wrong, you know," she added, with a laugh which revealed the two rows of large but splendid teeth.

"And in order to avoid leading you into temptation, my beauty," said Meagles, rising from his chair, "I will take a stroll while I smoke my cigar. It is now eight o'clock," he observed, after consulting his watch;—"and I will this very night commence operations with a ramble about the vicinage of Carlton House for an hour or so."

"You will return to supper, Tim?" said the widow, as he took up his hat to depart.

"Assuredly, my charmer," responded Meagles;—"and I leave my whip as the security for my return."

Then, stepping close up to the Amazon, he threw his arms round her neck and imprinted a kiss upon her moist red mouth.

"Hey-dey! what does this mean?" she cried, affecting an angry look, as she arranged the cap which the abruptness of the proceeding had somewhat disturbed.

"Did you not promise a kiss at meeting and another at parting on every occasion?" demanded Meagles, laughing with all the joyousness of former times.

"Oh! that is the interpretation you put upon my

words—eh, Master Tim?" exclaimed the lady, her own hilarious tones now echoing the merriment of her friend. "Well, I suppose I must suffer you to have your own way in *that* respect, at all events. And now take yourself off without farther delay—so that you may return all the earlier to enjoy your supper——"

"And likewise the kiss at meeting again," added Meagles, still laughing as he quitted the room.

Then, having lighted his cigar in the hall, he sallied forth upon his evening ramble.

CHAPTER CXC.

A SCENE IN A DARK AVENUE.

TAKING the nearest cut to St. James's Park, and enjoying his havannah with a more than ordinary zest,—for his spirits had risen almost to their former tone, now that he had adopted some settled proceeding with regard to the Prince,—Tim Meagles entered the long avenue shaded by trees and generally known as the Mall. He walked up and down three or four times in front of Carlton House, and looked wistfully up at the windows blazing with light, as if he would have given some of the best years of his existence to be enabled to catch a glimpse of what was passing within that palatial residence.

Suddenly a man, of tall stature, enveloped in a cloak and with his hat drawn over his countenance, hurried past;—and it instantaneously struck Meagles that the figure, just as it now appeared in its disguise, was not unknown to him. The light of a lamp in front of Carlton House had enabled him to observe how carefully the individual was wrapped up in that capacious mantle, and how studiously the face was concealed by the hat: a moment afterwards and the man had disappeared from his view, plunging as it were into the obscurity of the adjacent avenue. So hurriedly had the individual passed that he had not appeared to notice Meagles at all.

For a few moments Tim stopped short—took the cigar from his mouth—and murmured to himself, "Where on earth have I seen that figure before?" Then, with the vividness of an inspiration, did it flash to his memory that he had beheld the individual on board the *Diana* frigate.

"Yes—it is the same—Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, the merchant," he said to himself, as the remembrance struck him;—"the individual who came on board from the pirate-ship, along with Joe Warren and Stephen Price, and who is to be a witness against those fellows! Well, I never once caught a glimpse of his countenance all the time he was on board the *Diana*. There is something strange and mysterious about him;—else wherefore should he have remained in such strict seclusion in his cabin at sea? and why, on a warm evening like this, should he go about enveloped in that huge cloak? It is singular—very singular!"

And having thus mused upon the matter, Tim Meagles replaced the cigar between his lips and mechanically struck into the avenue in the same direction which Philip Ramsey—for he indeed it was—had just taken.

Sauntering leisurely along—smoking his cigar—and allowing his thoughts to wander from the incident that had just occurred to other subjects, Meagles had soon ceased to devote any particular attention to the appearance of the disguised one;—and he was pondering upon the generous character of the profligate Amazon and the winning beauty of the amiable Rose Foster, when the rapid advance of footsteps struck upon his ear. All that line of pathway which skirted the railings of the enclosure, was enveloped in total darkness—for the evening, though warm, was cloudy and starless, and the few thinly scattered oil-lamps facing the house on the other side of the Mall reached not with their inefficient beams even half across the several avenues of trees.

On hearing the footsteps approach, their rapid tread instantaneously brought back the incident of the cloaked figure to the mind of Meagles;—and concealing in his hand the lighted end of the cigar, he sat down upon a bench placed against the trunk of a tree, his person being thereby absorbed as it were in the deepest of the deep shades which obscured the avenue. For one of those vague and unaccountable impulses of curiosity which amount almost to a presentiment, had now seized upon him; and his attention being re-awakened in respect to the individual whom he only knew by the name of Gustavus Wakefield, he resolved to take note of his proceedings.

Scarcely had he stationed himself under the tree, when a form, darker than the darkness, passed rapidly by;—and the shape of the figure was sufficiently discernible to enable Meagles to identify it with the one he had previously seen. In less than a minute the rapid footsteps suddenly ceased; and the sounds of voices, low and murmuring, reached the ears of Meagles.

"The mysterious Mr. Wakefield has an appointment, doubtless," thought Tim within himself; "and he has just encountered the person whom he came here to meet. But, Ah! they are approaching this way!"

Such was indeed the case, as the footsteps now announced: but the voices had altogether ceased. Meagles slipped behind the tree in order to keep watch with the greater certainty of being unobserved;—and in a few moments the cloaked one, accompanied by the person who had just joined him, came and seated themselves upon the very bench which Meagles had the instant before abandoned.

They now began to speak again—and Tim discovered that the pseudo Mr. Gustavus Wakefield's companion was a female.

"You received my note—and you have kept the appointment which I gave you," said Ramsey, in a low whispering tone, but which was perfectly audible to the listener stationed behind the tree.

"Yes—I received your note—and I have come to the appointment," responded the Countess of Desborough—for she it was: and the voice in which she spoke was marked with the unnatural calmness that evinced a terrible inward struggle to subdue an outburst of painful—perhaps agonising emotions. "But wherefore have you sought to disturb my peace—*you*, for whom I have already suffered so much?"

"Then am I to understand that everything is at an end between us," demanded Ramsey,—"and that you now hate as deeply as you once loved me?"

"Suffice it for you to know that I repent bitterly, bitterly of the past," returned Eleanor, in a profound tone,—"and that if you have any regard for my happiness you will bring this interview to as speedy a termination as possible."

"Your words, haughty and cruel lady, afford the fullest and completest explanation which it is possible for you to give with regard to the present state of your feelings towards me. How changed, then," continued Ramsey, in a tone which rather partook of spiteful upbraiding than of gentle remonstrance,—"how changed, then, has become the once loving and yielding Countess of Desborough——"

"Hush! breathe not my name, I implore you!" interrupted the lady, in a voice full of terror and anguish. "We may be overheard—listeners may approach stealthily through the deep obscurity of this avenue——"

"There is no danger of that," said Ramsey. "Let us continue to speak in a low tone and with as little excitement as possible; and the sounds of any approaching footsteps will convey their own warning to our ears. I was observing, then, that the once adoring and tender lady who was ready to abandon home, husband, rank, station, and everything, for the man to whom she had pledged her love, is now so changed that she even grudges him an interview of a few minutes,—she who was wont to think that even hours passed away too rapidly when spent with me!"

"Alas! you know it is not my fault," said the Countess, in a trembling tone, "if fearful circumstances occurred to cast a blight upon that love which I do not deny having devoted to you."

"And had you never learnt that the false Gustavus Wakefield was the resuscitated criminal Philip Ramsey," observed the man, with a horrible bitterness in his accents, whisperingly low though they were, "you would have continued to love on to the end?"

"Your words fill me with a dread which is almost overwhelming," said the Countess, her voice broken by half-strangling gasps and convulsions of terror. "My God! if we were overheard? What would become of *you?*—what would the world think of *me?*"

"I care but little what may happen to myself," returned Ramsey, affecting a deep despondency of tone,—"now that you have annihilated all the fond hopes which I had ventured to build up during my absence."

"Hopes!" ejaculated the Countess, in accents full of alarm. "What hopes could you have conceived?—and wherefore have you returned to England? Do you not dread my husband's wrath, should he discover that you have thus acted in contravention of his commands?"

"Your husband will not dare to give publicity to a narrative that must expose his wife's shame while inflicting ruin upon me," answered Ramsey; "and I was an idiot at the time to suffer my fears so far to prevail over my reason and common sense, as to drive me into that banishment which the Earl of Desborough enjoined as the sole condition of his forbearance."

"But should my husband happen to encounter you," said the lady, "he might adopt in a sudden paroxysm of rage that extreme course which in his calmer moments he would doubtless deplore."

"I thank you for your advice," observed Ramsey, in a cold tone: "but you will permit me to be the best judge of my own actions. Nevertheless," he immediately added, with the sudden assumption of a kinder tone, "I do not wish to speak harshly to you. Just now you appeared astonished and incredulous that I should have cherished any hope with regard to you: but I had a firmer faith and a stronger reliance in woman's love than the result has justified. I flattered myself that if your heart were really mine, no possible circumstances could have altered the state of your affections—no human influence could have converted that love into hatred. I thought that you would have become my guardian genius and my good angel—pitying me for the past, and aiding me in my endeavour to make all possible atonement by my conduct in future. I had buoyed myself up with the idea that your love would rise superior to all earthly influences, no matter how terrible they might have proved. But I have been mistaken;—and the very tone in which you addressed me when we met ere now, and the recoil which you made from my outstretched arms, convinced me in a moment that I had nothing to expect or anticipate of all the bright visions which imagination had conjured up while away."

"You speak as if *you* at least still entertained generous feelings towards me," murmured the Countess. "Be truly generous, then—and let this interview cease at once. For I will not hesitate to declare that it is painful—very painful to me! Besides, the forgiveness of a noble-hearted husband imposes upon me certain duties which I would not violate."

"I perceive by your tone that I have indeed become an object of dread aversion to the woman who once loved me so enthusiastically, and whom I still love so devotedly," said Ramsey, throwing into his accents a tremulous pathos so well simulated that the Countess could not for a single moment suspect its sincerity. "You ask me to be generous—and I will prove so to the extent of my power. Grant me, then, one favour—one last boon—and I will afterwards bid you farewell for ever!"

"And that boon—that favour?" said the Countess, catching eagerly at the hope of disembarrassing herself eternally of a man for whom she did indeed entertain a horrible aversion and an intense loathing, although her fears induced her to conceal those sentiments as much as she was able.

"The boon which I crave," returned Ramsey, "is that you will afford me the opportunity of gazing once more—and only for a few brief minutes—upon that wondrous beauty which has become so impressed upon my mind as to form as it were a portion of my very memory itself. Let me see your countenance in all the splendour of its loveliness—let me gaze upon your form, apparelled in the garb best calculated to display the glory of its perfection."

"You are mad!—you are raving!" murmured the Countess, the hope which had so recently sprung up in her mind, now changing to a poignant alarm. "How can I grant you such an opportunity as you demand? To be enabled to come forth alone this evening, enveloped in a plain cloak and with this simple straw bonnet upon my head, I have been compelled to invent excuses the re-

petition of which would rouse the most unpleasant suspicions not only in the mind of my husband, but likewise in the breasts of my servants. How, then, can you suppose it possible for me to grant the strange and childish request which you have made? Oh! be generous towards me—be generous, I implore you: and I will henceforth think of you as kindly as I can!"

"I have set my heart upon the condition which I have named," said Ramsey, "and the fulfilment of which shall be instantaneously followed by my departure from London—never to return! It may be a foolish whim on my part—it may be a silly phantasy: but I cannot renounce the only gleam of happiness which I may be destined to enjoy in this life. Grant me, then, the boon that I crave; —and I swear that you shall experience naught save the most profound respect at my hands. Did I seek to gratify my own inclinations at the expense of your feelings, I should even now fling my arms around you and fold you in my embrace. But I do not permit even the skirt of my cloak to touch yours. Through the obscurity of the evening I saw just now that you recoiled from me when we first met;—and not for worlds would I lay a finger upon the hand which has so often been pressed to my lips. Consider this present forbearance on my part as a guarantee and an earnest of the same reverential respect when you grant me a last meeting that I may gaze once more upon the face and form which have ravished my senses ever since we first encountered each other. Refuse not, then, the boon which will shed one single gleam of joyous light upon the dark pathway that I must henceforth pursue in this world. I do not ask for much—I seek to take no advantage of all that has occurred between us—I want nothing from you but the favour which you can so easily grant, and which I shall esteem so highly. Now, what is your decision?"

"Do you solemnly and sacredly swear, by the great God who is above us, that you will never molest me more, if I accede to your present demand?" said the Countess of Desborough, after a long pause.

"I swear by all I deem holy and divine!" was Ramsey's unhesitating response. "And I swear in addition that I will not even cast upon you a look that shall be fraught with any other sentiment than that of the profoundest respect."

"But will it not suffice if I appear to-morrow, in the broad sunlight, in Hyde Park—apparelled in my most becoming vesture, and riding in my carriage?" asked the noble lady.

"Ah! is not such a question a veritable mockery of my present position," exclaimed Ramsey,—"doomed as I am to creep about in disguise and only when darkness is upon the face of the earth?"

"True," said the Countess, in a musing tone. "But where can such an interview as that which you propose take place? I would not for worlds make confidants of any friends for the purpose of meeting you at their house: you cannot come to Berkeley Square;—and I will not repair to any stranger's abode."

"Then what course will you adopt?" demanded Ramsey. "I can suggest nothing."

"Will you really insist upon this foolish proceeding?" said the Countess in an imploring tone. "Consider all the difficulties—all the embarrassments—all the perils of the position in which you will place me, merely to gratify this caprice on your part."

"And will you not consider the sacrifice which I make in abandoning for ever all claim upon your affection?" cried Ramsey. "But let us not re-argue the point——"

"Hush! speak not so loud, I implore you," murmured Lady Desborough. "You are decided, I perceive—and therefore I must succumb to your demand:"—then, after a minute's reflection, she said, "Are you aware that the Earl has become the purchaser of Stamford Manor?"

"I learnt that circumstance last evening," returned Ramsey, "when making guarded and cautious inquiries whether you were in town at the present time, so that I might be assured of my letter reaching you in safety."

"And should you feel any repugnance to visiting Stamford Manor for the few minutes during which the interview you require would last?"

"Were the place inhabited by fiends, I would cheerfully hasten thither for such a purpose," answered the resuscitated.

"Then let the appointment be at Stamford Manor," said the Countess. "You, who know it well, are aware that there is a private door at the back of the house communicating with a staircase, at the head of which there is a suite of small apartments. In the parlour of that suite will I receive you for five minutes to-morrow evening at nine o'clock punctually. It is fortunate," added Lady Desborough in a musing tone, "that the Earl has proposed to return to the Manor in the morning."

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks for this kindness on your part!" exclaimed Ramsey. "And you will be attired in your most charming vesture——"

"Yes—yes: whatever I promise I will fulfill," cried the Countess. "See that you prove equally faithful in accomplishing your part of the compact —which is, never more to seek me after to-morrow night."

"I have pledged my oath—and I shall keep it,' answered the resuscitated criminal.

"To-morrow night, then, at nine o'clock you may visit the Manor in the way that I have described," said Eleanor. "You will find the key of the private door inside the bowl which the statue of Bacchus grasps in his hand. That statue is near the gate of the back garden, which will be unlocked."

"I am acquainted with every feature of the place," observed Ramsey: "and at nine punctually shall I avail myself of your kind permission."

"You have now nothing more to say to me?" inquired Eleanor, her voice evincing the anxiety which she felt to depart.

"Nothing—unless it be to renew my thanks for the favour which you have shown to my request," answered Ramsey.

The Countess of Desborough vouchsafed no rejoinder to these words, but hurried away in the direction of the nearest issue from the park.

"Arrogant and haughty woman!" exclaimed Ramsey aloud, giving vent to his triumphant and vindictive feelings the moment he was assured that the Countess was beyond ear-shot: "you have

fallen into the trap that has been so skilfully baited to ensnare you! My assumed pathos told admirably—my affected devotion to your image was a sublime touch of policy! You deemed me sincere: there was a moment when you were even moved yourself! Oh! had you flung yourself into my arms the first instant that we met, I should have been melted into a softness that would not have permitted me to injure a hair of your head. You might have robbed me of my sting: but you have chosen to excite my venomous rancour. You could have disarmed me of all evil purposes—yes, you could have reduced me to a condition of feminine weakness: but you have now rendered me as remorseless as a tiger! And after all, noble Countess, I would sooner sell thee to the Prince as the price of my pardon, than enjoy thy love again and live in terror of returning to that scaffold through the ordeal of which I have passed scatheless once. But now let me speed to Carlton House and communicate my success to the Prince."

Having thus given audible utterance to his thoughts, Philip Ramsey rose from the bench and hurried along the avenue in the direction of Carlton House.

The first impulse of Meagles was to follow, in order to assure himself that the resuscitated criminal did actually visit the palatial dwelling of the Prince; but recollecting that the man had given expression to his intentions when believing himself to be unheard by a living soul, Tim saw no necessity for acquiring any farther evidence on that score. He accordingly retraced his way with all possible despatch to the Amazon's abode in King Street.

And need we say that Meagles was deeply astonished at all that had this evening met his ears?—need we state how difficult he had found it to restrain a sudden start or cry of wonder, when the almost incredible fact of Ramsey's resuscitation had smitten his ears as he stood concealed behind the tree? So tremendous indeed was his amazement at this discovery, that the circumstance of the brilliant Lady Desborough having been the criminal's paramour, was comparatively of little interest, startling as this fact would have appeared if revealed alone. For the Countess had always enjoyed an untarnished reputation; and Meagles had invariably heard her spoken of as a bright exception to the average standard of morality amongst the female aristocracy.

Profoundly interesting, then, was the tale which he had to carry back to Lady Lade, who little anticipated that the very first experiment to which her suggestion had been put would produce such great results. Prolific indeed, however, had proved the intiative ramble of Meagles in the vicinity of Carlton House: for it was impossible to mistake the treacherous designs which Ramsey entertained towards Lady Desborough. In fact, it was apparent from the thoughts to which he had so unguardedly given audible expression, that the whole proceeding was nothing more nor less than a stratagem adopted with a view to place the Countess in the power of the Prince of Wales.

"Now, my dear Tim," exclaimed the Amazon, who certainly upon the present occasion appeared to be the most joyous widow that ever wore weeds, —"you see that my hint was a good one. Who knows what may result from the important secrets which you have learnt this evening?"

"Let us deliberate calmly upon the course which we ought to pursue," said Meagles. "It is quite clear that this Ramsey has somehow or another obtained a hold upon the Prince, from whom he expects his pardon in return for throwing the Countess of Desborough into his arms."

"Well, let us sit down to supper and then chat at our ease," observed Lady Lade. "But I say, Tim—what does this mean? You have actually kissed me seven times since you came in."

"It is a relief to my feelings which can scarcely contain themselves for joy, my beauty," replied Meagles, with a merry laugh.

"If this be the way in which you keep an agreement, Master Tim," said the handsome widow, with an arch smile upon her rich red lips, "I must beware how I place too much confidence in you. Come, sir—sit down—not too near me, if you please —and do the honours of the table."

And thus, in the most jocular mood and hilarious humour, did the Amazon and Tim Meagles place themselves at the board on which the most social of all repasts was served up.

CHAPTER CXCI.

THE APPOINTMENT.

At an early hour on the following morning, the Earl and Countess of Desborough left town for Stamford Manor.

During the ride the charming Eleanor battled as well as she was able against the dispiriting influence of the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind, and against the vague presentiments of evil which were ever and anon recurring to torture her soul. She assumed a cheerfulness which she was very far from experiencing in reality, and which did not altogether deceive her husband: but he was very far from divining the true cause of that mental depression over which she endeavoured to throw the sun-light of her smiles and the witching charm of her conversational powers. He did not however suffer her to perceive that he noticed the glitter of uneasiness in her superb dark eyes, or the occasional sickliness into which her smiles merged; for he had made it a rule never to seek to penetrate her private thoughts, but to wait patiently until she might choose to reveal them.

They arrived at Stamford Manor to luncheon; and the Earl afterwards mounted his horse to ride over the estate until dinner-time. Eleanor then retired to her own chamber, where she penned a letter, which she concealed in her bosom. She next procured a pistol and a dagger from the Earl's apartment; and, having satisfied herself that the former was loaded and the latter well pointed, she repaired to the suite of rooms of which she had spoken to Ramsey.

There was a communication between these apartments and the interior of the mansion, as well as with the garden by means of the staircase. The rooms were three in number: the first, which was also nearest to the staircase, was furnished as a parlour—the central one as a bed-chamber—and the third as a dressing-closet, or boudoir if the occupant were a lady. The traditions of Stamford

Manor recorded that this suite of apartments had been inhabited by Hannah Lightfoot, the Quakeress, during her sojourn there about thirty-seven years previously to the time of which we are writing.

It was into these rooms that Lady Desborough now made her way;—and in the drawer of a piece of furniture in the parlour did she conceal the pistol and dagger. She then descended the staircase —passed out into the garden by the door at the bottom—and took the key with her. This she placed in the cup which a statue of the God of Wine, standing on a pedestal near the garden-gate, held in its hand. Lastly she took away the key of the garden-gate itself, so that it might not be locked as usual after dusk.

These arrangements having been accomplished, the Countess of Desborough walked in the garden and the shrubbery, to court the solitude which was now most congenial to her soul. She thought on many, many things—but principally the event of the approaching evening;—and as her mind was active in its painful meditations, the time passed by more rapidly than it usually does in hours of anxiety, nervousness, and sorrow.

At five o'clock she re-entered the mansion, and proceeded to her own room to dress for dinner. The apparel she chose was elegant and tasteful: it was white watered silk beautifully trimmed with lace looped up with roses. Although her complexion was olive, yet was it so transparent and delicate in its tinge of bistre, that it was by no means unsuited for that white dress;—and as the excitement of her mind had deepened upon her cheeks the rich carnation hue that glowed through the diaphanous skin, the general effect was captivating in the extreme.

Her hair, soft as silk and of velvet blackness, hung in massive tresses upon her polished shoulders;—and the low corsage of the dress revealed sufficient of the well-proportioned bust to show that it retained all the roundness and freshness of youth. For be it remembered that Lady Desborough was only in her twenty-ninth year; and at that age a woman of well-preserved charms is in all the glory of her beauty.

A wreath of white roses set off the sable darkness and raven glossiness of her hair; and the ornaments that clasped the arms, which were naked to the shoulders, assisted to display their admirable symmetry by outlining their modelled roundness. Altogether the Countess of Desborough appeared on the present occasion to an advantage which rendered her a woman for whom the misanthrope would consent to live, and for whom the chivalrous champion would hesitate not to die.

When the dinner was served up at six o'clock, the Earl was somewhat surprised to behold the more than usual care which his beauteous wife had evidently bestowed upon her toilette, considering that they were alone together. For although Eleanor invariably dressed with a richness becoming her position and an elegance in accord with her refined taste, yet she was not accustomed to appear in the vesture suited to a grand party when there was no company to receive at all. But she hastened to observe "that she thought it not unlikely their friends the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire would visit the Manor in the evening, as she believed they had intended to leave London that morning in order to pass a few days at their villa in the neighbourhood."

This excuse—and an invented one it really was—appeared quite natural to the Earl, who was moreover too proud of his splendid Countess to think of being dissatisfied at any unusual carefulness of toilette which had the effect of enhancing the glory of her charms.

The dinner passed—the dessert was placed upon the table—and Eleanor partook of a glass or two of wine, which increased the animation that mental excitement had imparted to her cheeks. She remained conversing with the Earl until about half-past eight; —and then she retired to her own chamber, while he withdrew to the library.

When alone in her bed-room, the Countess looked in the mirror and saw that the carnation had deepened upon her cheeks and that the fire of her eyes was more than ordinarily lustrous. Indeed, she could not fail to observe that she was brilliantly beautiful on this occasion;—and she now began to regret that she had taken so much pains to enhance the natural effect of her loveliness by the auxiliaries of the toilette. Let not the reader, however, imagine that it was art which had shed the hue of the carnation upon her cheek: no—'twas the natural bloom of vigorous health which the wine had deepened into a ruddier glow.

But we said that she regretted the pains she had taken to set off the brilliancy of her charms to the utmost advantage. Yes—she regretted it now that the dreaded moment was approaching: for might not Philip Ramsey be tempted by her appearance to pass the bounds of that reverential discretion and respectful forbearance which he had promised to observe? Ah! if he dared, had she not provided weapons wherewith to defend herself?—and was she not resolved to use them in a case of emergency, at all risks and in defiance of all consequences? Aye —and had she not nerved herself by means of the stimulating influence of wine, to play the part of a heroine, if need should be?

As these reflections traversed her mind, the momentary regret was dissipated:—and in its place arose a feeling of satisfaction to think that she had fulfilled *her* portion of the compact to the very letter, and was therefore fully justified in demanding a similar fidelity to the agreement on *his* part. She had done as he had desired: she had arrayed herself in her most becoming apparel—and there would consequently be no pretext for another meeting—no excuse on his part for demanding another interview.

Thus do we find this noble lady faithful to the terms which had been imposed upon her, and which she had accepted as the condition of Ramsey's bidding her farewell for ever. We shall presently see how far she was justified in placing any reliance upon the solemnly-pledged oath of that man whom she had once loved with all the ardour of a worship and all the frenzy of an infatuation.

She looked at her watch—it wanted five minutes to nine. Satisfying herself that the note which she had written in the afternoon was safe in her bosom, the Countess of Desborough summoned all her courage to her aid, and proceeded along the passage to the parlour where she had appointed to meet Ramsey. She carried in her hands the two wax-candles which belonged to her own bed-chamber; and upon entering the room, she carefully closed the shutters and drew the curtains, that the light should not be observed from without. Then she looked to ascertain that the loaded pistol and the

pointe d dagger were safe where she had deposited them; —and scarcely had she satisfied herself on this he ad, when she heard footsteps stealthily ascending th e stairs.

Her breath was suspended as she listened—her bosom remained upheaved for a few moments—and the co lour came and went upon her cheeks in variations s rapid as the play of the moonlight upon the rippli ig surface of a lake. The dreaded instant was at ha id—and she experienced a sensation like a warnir ig that this was a crisis in her destiny. Anoth er moment—and the door opened!

The n the breath came again—and the bosom fell —yes, and the heart too fell within. A dimness overspread her vision, and she staggered a few steps backw ard, as the ominous figure, muffled in the capaci ous cloak and with a large hat slouched over the co un tenance which it completely shaded, crossed the thr eshold and stood in her presence. But when that f ig ure, like some sinister being of another world, turned and closed the door behind,—when, in fact, the belief struck to the soul of the Countess that she was now *alone* with the resuscitated criminal,—the thought sent through her entire frame such a thrill of horror that she was instantaneously recalled, or rather startled to a full sense of her unenviable position.

But the visitor stood there—nor offered to remove his hat;—and this circumstance struck the Countess as singular. She threw upon him an eagle glance—a glance which pierced like a lightning-flash through the shade in which the slouching brims and the high cloak-collar obscured his features;—and then a scream burst from her lips as she saw that her visitor was *not* Philip Ramsey.

At the same moment the hat was flung off—the cloak thrown aside:—and the Prince of Wales stood in the presence of the Countess of Desborough.

"I am betrayed! I am betrayed!" she murmured

all the colour flying from her cheeks, and her limbs tottering back once more. "But what means this imposture—this cheat?" she exclaimed, suddenly nerved with the courage of desperation: and her eyes flashed fire and her countenance grew flushed again.

"Banish all excitement, beautiful lady," said the Prince, in a tone of joyous confidence: "for we may perhaps have some few matters to discuss—and I should recommend you to enter upon the argument with coolness and composure."

While the Prince was yet speaking, the terrible thought flashed to the brain of the Countess that inasmuch as he had come thither as Ramsey's substitute, he was doubtless aware of everything which had taken place between herself and the resuscitated criminal;—and recoiling from the hideous idea that her shame and infamy were thus known to a man who was so thoroughly heartless and so remorselessly cruel, she sank down as if annihilated upon the sofa that happened to be near.

Again did the rich carnation fly from her cheeks: and with a look of despair fixed upon his Royal Highness, she appeared to regard him as the arbiter of her destinies.

"Listen to me, Lady Desborough," said the Prince, crossing his arms over his breast as he stood before her drawn up to his full height: "you are at length in my power—and you feel it! Circumstances have ordained that my vengeance and my passion shall be consummated at the same time. I have longed to humble you—and with a single word can I do it: I have longed to possess you—and in a few minutes you will surrender yourself to my arms!"

"Never—never!" exclaimed the Countess, actuated by a sudden frenzy: and she bounded towards the place where she had concealed the murderous weapons.

But the Prince, imagining that she was about to seek the door in order to effect her escape, caught her round the waist;—and, as he thus drew her somewhat suddenly and violently back, she pulled out the drawer the handle of which she had just grasped.

The pistol and the dagger were thus revealed to the eyes of the Prince, who absolutely hurled the Countess from him while he snatched up the weapons. The unhappy lady was thrown forcibly upon the sofa; and finding herself baffled, defeated, overwhelmed at every point, she covered her face with her hands and burst into a flood of tears. At the same moment the Prince snapped the dagger in twain and dashed the contents of a water-decanter over the priming of the pistol.

"Now you are utterly and irredeemably in my power," he said, with a tone and look of savage triumph. "I said ere now that I could humble you with a word—and that word shall be spoken without hesitation and without remorse. Yes, proud and haughty lady—I salute thee as the paramour of the man who was hanged——"

A shriek that was half stifled by a convulsive sob, burst from the lips of the wretched Eleanor as she clasped her hands together, while the whole elastic symmetry of her elegant form writhed with the spasmodic thrill of horror that shot through it.

"Now, you have forced me thus to proclaim the humiliating fact," continued the Prince,—"*you*, who would have murdered me if I had left you the chance," he cried, flinging a rapid look upon the broken poniard and the useless pistol. "But you need not affect the prude towards me, after having revelled in the embraces of a man whose neck bears the mark of the accursed halter! Oh! you may groan in spirit, proud lady: but it delights me thus to humble thee—yes, *thee* who hast proved so cruel and so disdainful towards myself! But all thy proceedings are well known to me, Lady Desborough—and I have farther evidence, if you wish it to be proclaimed, to show that your virtue is not the most stubborn in the world. For the resuscitated criminal must have been speedily forgotten by the frail fair one who some few weeks after that amour was seen gallanting with the pretty and baby-faced Lord Florimel disguised in a female garb!"

"On my honour—on my oath," I am innocent in that respect!" cried the Countess, springing to her feet and contemplating the heir-apparent with mingled terror and anger. "Oh! surely, surely the *one* fault of my life is a sufficient reproach—yes, and a stigma too—without this second accusation that is so utterly unfounded!"

"What matters it, lady, on how many lovers you have bestowed your favours," demanded the Prince, ironically, "when a felon can boast of having been the object of thy virgin affections? For he has told me all—yes, everything—thy husband's tremendous secret——"

"The miscreant Ramsey!" muttered Eleanor between her set teeth, while an expression of diabolical hatred swept like a thunder-cloud over her grandly beautiful countenance: then, in a rapid and fearfully excited tone, she said aloud, "Prince of Wales, listen to me for one moment—and let us thoroughly understand our relative positions! You are acquainted with all the secrets of my life—and you can blast my reputation and my happiness with a single word. I am in your power—I know it—I feel it. But are you the less in mine?—and can I breathe no word that will also blast *your* reputation and *your* happiness? Remember the scene at Carlton House—on the memorable night of the ball! Remember, I say, how Mrs. Fitzherbert suddenly appeared in the room to which I had been inveigled, and how she proclaimed herself your wife! But there is now *another* Princess of Wales at Carlton House;—and the secret that his Royal Highness the heir-apparent to the British throne is a perjured bigamist can be as easily thundered forth to the public, as wretched, wretched narrative of my infamy and disgrace! Pause, then—reflect—and beware how you proclaim a war to the death against me—a war that shall only terminate in the ruin of us both!"

The Prince had listened attentively—with the cold sardonism of a man who cares not for the menaces which are levelled against him;—and the Countess of Desborough beheld with an increasing terror the total failure of the course which she was adopting. She read upon his countenance the contempt that he experienced for her words: she saw in his looks the fiendish satisfaction of a certain triumph.

"But the proofs of my marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert?" he exclaimed: "those proofs, I say—where are they? Destroyed—annihilated! The papers are burnt—and no one will credit the mad assertions of interested or revengeful women!

You perceive, therefore, Eleanor, that I am not in your power——"

"One word more, then!" ejaculated the Countess, well nigh driven to the frenzy of despair: "consummate the crowning infamy with regard to me—force me to surrender to your arms—and I swear by heaven that I will yet wreak a deadly vengeance upon you and yours! Prince of Wales," added the unhappy lady, the words hissing between her ashy lips, "your sister the Princess Sophia has become a mother—you know it——and, as there is a God above us, I will reveal that tremendous secret if you dare to persist in your cowardly conduct towards me!"

The heir-apparent was staggered: for this blow came as cruelly as it was unexpected. The Countess perceived the sudden effect which the menace had produced—and her features became animated with a joyous triumph. It seemed as if all the fire of her beauty, which a moment before had paled and grown dim, blazed up resplendently in an instant;—and his Royal Highness, on recovering from the shock that he had just experienced, was seized with another and far different feeling. He beheld before him a woman who appeared suddenly to have changed and dilated into the glory of a goddess;—and all at once was he maddened by the effect of that flushing of her splendid countenance, that lighting up of her magnificent dark eyes, and that heaving of her half-naked bosom,—these being the evidences of the joyous triumph which had suddenly thrilled with a warm glow throughout her entire being.

"Eleanor, Eleanor," he said, his voice trembling with ardent passion, "let us be friends—let us not continue enemies! I love you—yes—I love you—and I implore your pardon for the torture which I have inflicted upon your feelings. I was wrong—I was a coward—I performed an unmanly part: but you will forgive me—you will forgive me! Oh! remember that there was once an occasion when you were even ready to crown my happiness—when the appointment was made—and when your fervid kisses had already given me a foretaste of the elysian joys which I was to experience in your arms. Why, then, have you since been cruel? If I can still long so ardently to possess you, acquainted as I am with the secret of your *first* love—can *you* not efface from your mind the impression which any untoward circumstances with regard to myself may have made upon it? You became the victim of a felon: I took as a mistress the wife of a felon also. On your side, Philip Ramsey exists as the object of aversion and loathing: on mine, the husband of Mrs. Brace stands in a similar light. Now, Eleanor, are we not upon equal terms? Oh! I was wrong, I was wrong to cherish sentiments of vengeance against you—you, who are so grandly beautiful! Let us be friends, then, adorable creature—let us be friends: for I would rather—Oh! ten thousand times rather receive you, yielding and full of voluptuous warmth, to my arms, than compel you, struggling and battling, to submit to my will. Come, then, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor—and let there be naught save love and tenderness between us!"

The Countess of Desborough had sunk back upon the sofa while the Prince was thus appealing to her in an impassioned strain. The thought flashed to her mind that if she yielded to his suit, all chances of exposure would be averted;—and she felt that it were more prudent to establish peace at any sacrifice than be precipitated into open warfare with the Prince. Not that her aversion towards him was by any means mitigated: on the contrary, she abhorred and loathed him with a more intense detestation than ever;—and neither his handsome person nor his honied words were now able to produce the slightest effect upon the sensuality of her temperament. But she saw that he was bent upon accomplishing his purpose: she felt that she was in his power;—and she likewise comprehended too well that any vindictive measures which she might subsequently adopt, would only involve her own exposure without changing the incident of that triumph which he was this night resolute in achieving.

"Oh! I see that you are moved, Eleanor—you are not blind to the prudence of adopting a conciliatory course!" he exclaimed, his desires now goaded to a positive frenzy. "Never did you appear more magnificently beauteous in my eyes;—and instead of henceforth being compelled to regard me as a remorseless, bitter, and uncompromising enemy, you will learn to look upon me as an impassioned adorer and a staunch friend! Come, then, to my arms, thou adorable one—come, and make me happy!"

And placing himself by her side upon the sofa, he took her hand and pressed it fervently to his lips.

The action was unresisted on her part: indeed, she scarcely appeared to notice it—for she was still absorbed in profound reflection, balancing the alternatives between which she had to choose.

Emboldened by his success, the Prince panted all the more longingly for a consummation of his burning passion. He beheld the door at the farther end of the room; and it struck him that it opened into a bed-chamber. Rising gently but hastily from the sofa, he proceeded to satisfy his curiosity in this respect;—and the result of his examination was in accordance with his prescient wishes. Then he carried the wax-candles into that apartment;—and, all this being the work of a few moments, he once more took the hand of the Countess and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh! must I yield, then—must I yield?" she murmured in a faint and tremulous tone;—and, as if her senses were leaving her, did she abandon herself to the embrace in which her royal lover now folded her.

He pressed his lips to hers—he strained her to his breast: but neither the ardent kisses which he bestowed upon her, nor the closeness of that contact in which he held her, excited any scintillation of the fires that on a former occasion he had observed, through the windows of her eyes, to burn so furiously in her soul. Drooping, yielding, and powerless as if it were a mere supple and pliant statue that he folded in his arms, she suffered him to drag rather than lead her into the adjacent chamber.

But scarcely was the threshold passed, when she was recalled to herself by a sudden and thrilling sense of inexpressible hatred and disgust for the man who had that night exercised so cowardly and ferocious a tyranny over her. Had he pursued his advantage while yet she was seated upon the sofa, he would have triumphed—and Eleanor Des-

borough would have been added as another gem to the coronet of his conquests. But that inveterate sensuality which had prompted him to make his happiness as complete as possible, by removing her to the adjoining chamber, suddenly struck her as something from which her mind revolted: she saw that he was treating her as the mere object of his lust, without a single particle of refinement or delicacy in the passion that was animating him;—and all that minute preparation, even to the conveyance of the candles into the sleeping apartment, inspired her with a sudden feeling of unconquerable aversion and disgust.

Nerved all in a moment to the energy of an outraged woman, the Countess of Desborough tore herself from the arms of the Prince;—and, stepping back a few paces, she turned upon him her indignant countenance and her flashing eyes, exclaiming, "No—I prefer a war to the death: and the betrayal of your sister's secret shall avenge any outrage which you may think of offering to me!"

"By heavens! you shall succumb, be the consequences what they may!" cried the Prince, darting forward and winding his arms around her waist.

A scream burst from her lips: at the same instant the outer door of the parlour was flung open—and Tim Meagles, followed by the Earl of Desborough, appeared to the rescue of the Countess.

CHAPTER CXCII.

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS AND TIM MEAGLES.

At this unexpected occurrence, the Prince gave vent to an exclamation of rage, his hold upon Eleanor relaxing at the same moment,—so that with a comparatively small effort she burst away from him and flew into the arms of her husband.

"Bear her ladyship away, my lord," said Meagles hastily; "and leave me to settle matters with this royal debauchee."

"*You* settle matters with me!" cried the heir-apparent, in a tone of mingled indignation and contempt: then, as he endeavoured to push past Tim Meagles, he said with a malignant look, "Beware how you incur my vindictive displeasure a second time!"

"Your displeasure!" echoed Meagles, in a scornful tone: "I despise it! Now, my lord——"

But on glancing round he saw that the Earl was already crossing the threshold of the parlour, supporting the Countess on his arm: and, making way therefore to permit the heir-apparent to issue from the bed-chamber, Meagles followed him with one of the candles in his hand. The Prince was about to hasten away from the scene of his discomfiture: but the Earl of Desborough banged the outer door in his face—and Meagles, springing forward, locked that door and put the key in his pocket.

"What does this mean, sir?" demanded the Prince, surveying Meagles with a haughty air, which scarcely concealed the sudden tremor that shot with the pang of an ice-shaft transfixing his form. "Ah!" he ejaculated, springing back in dismay, as a pistol which Meagles drew from his breast flashed across his eyes: "would you murder me?"

"Not unless you compel me to wreak summary vengeance upon you," was the calm but resolute reply.

"Put up your weapon, sir!" exclaimed the Prince, assuming the air and tone of a bully rather than the demeanour and voice of conscious authority.

"I would much rather keep it in my hand," said Meagles, coolly: "and I warn your Royal Highness that it is loaded almost to the very muzzle. Whether I am a good shot, or otherwise, your Royal Highness has often had opportunities of judging both in the field and the shooting-gallery."

"In one word, Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the Prince, affecting a half-smile, "what am I to understand by this jesting? Do you wish to win me over by a joke to our ancient friendship? If so, I shall not hesitate to pardon you for the past, and reinstate you in that favour, which you always received at my hands so long as you were worthy of it?"

"Upon my soul, I never was farther off in all my life from the contemplation of a jest," replied Meagles: "but on the other hand I never was so close to the temptation of blowing a man's brains out, as I am at the present moment."

"You dare not use this language to me!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, the flush which his recently maddened desires had left upon his countenance, having by this time paled down into ghastliness.

"I dare address and treat you precisely as you deserve," responded Meagles: "and if you force me to adopt harsh words, a harsher deed will perhaps follow. Now, look you, Prince of Wales," continued Meagles, throwing himself in a leisurely manner upon the sofa, but keeping the pistol in such a direction that the life of his Royal Highness was held as it were in his grasp,—"I have suffered much at your hands, and the day of reckoning is come. You talk of a renewal of your ancient friendship? It is absurd—preposterous! You hate me—and I mistrust you. You will never forgive me for baffling your aims with regard to poor Rose Foster and for being the means of defeating your purpose here to-night: and I shall never forgive you for sending me out of the country. You would pledge your oath *now* to renew your former friendship towards me: but when once you were outside these doors, you would enact your past treachery all over again. You perceive, therefore, that I know your character too well to place any reliance upon your honour as a gentleman, your credit as a man, or your word as a prince. Indeed, I shall not feel easy in my mind, nor disencumber my heart of the load which your perfidy has heaped upon it, until I have expressed my real opinion of you: which is, that you are about as precious a rascal as ever disgraced the human species."

The Prince gave a sudden and convulsive start: but the pistol was instantaneously made to take a deliberate aim at his head, and there was now something so darkly resolute and moodily determined in the manner of Meagles, that the coward nature of the heir-apparent shrank appalled from the ghastly danger which appeared to menace him.

"What do you require of me, Meagles?" he demanded, in a low and hollow tone. "You are aware that I did not act towards you without deep pro-

vocation: for you deprived me of certain important papers——"

"Ah! but when you exercised your power against me," interrupted Tim, sternly, "and had me sent to the Home-Office as a preparatory step to being packed off out of the country, you were not aware that I had possession of your documents. It was only when that French rascal of your's went to pillage and plunder my lodgings, that the incident of the missing papers came to light. Your villanous treachery therefore preceded the discovery of those documents."

"But since you choose to argue the question," said the Prince, endeavouring to pluck up his courage, "let me remind you that *your* treachery in possessing yourself of those papers had been enacted at the time when I adopted harsh measures towards you."

"Yes—because I had all along been aware of your real character," retorted Meagles. "I had obeyed you as a willing instrument—a servile tool—a ready agent: I had done everything that a man could do to deserve kindness at your hands;—and I saw that you meant to throw me overboard and cast me off the instant I should prove no longer useful to you. For that reason did I employ the Amazon to beguile you one day in the bath-room at Carlton House, while I obtained possession of your documents."

"Ah! the Amazon — a veritable demoness!" muttered the Prince, in a tone audible only to himself.

"I do not know what you are saying," observed Meagles: "but I can only assure you that Lady Lade entertains towards you no better feeling than I do, and that any vengeance which I may be prompted to inflict upon you, is as much on her account as on my own."

"But do you know, sir, that you are guilty of high treason in menacing the life of the Prince of Wales?" demanded his Royal Highness, suddenly catching at a threat which, with characteristic arrogance, he fondly and foolishly thought would overawe his enemy in a moment.

"I know that there exists such a law as the one to which you allude," was the calm and indeed contemptuous reply: "but even were I a desperate man, without the glimpse of a loop-hole of escape, I should not hesitate to wreak my vengeance upon you. Much *less*, then, shall I shrink from acting according to circumstances, *now* that I may blow your brains out with the full certainty of getting off scot free."

"What do you mean?" asked the Prince, trembling all over: and, in order to *seem* cool and collected, he took a seat.

"The explanation is easily given and as readily understood," returned Meagles. "His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales employs a resuscitated criminal——Ah! you may well start—I know it all——"

"But who, in the name of God, told you *this?*" demanded the heir-apparent, now trembling like an aspen leaf.

"It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am thus intimately acquainted with all your proceedings," rejoined Meagles. "But, stay," he added, as a sudden thought struck him: "I do not wish you to run away with the notion that the wretched being Ramsey has betrayed *you*. If I permitted you to entertain that thought, your natural vindictiveness would speedily hand him over to the tender mercies of the ordeal which he has once escaped: and I am not barbarous enough to be instrumental in sending the poor devil back to the scaffold—for I suppose that Jack Ketch would do his duty more effectually the next time. I will therefore relieve you from any misapprehension relative to Philip Ramsey; and I will tell you the real truth—which is, that I saw him in St. James's Park—I recognised him as a person of whom I had caught a glimpse on board the *Diana*—I was led by curiosity to watch his movements—and I overheard all that passed during an interview which he had with the Countess of Desborough in the park. Their conversation revealed to me who he was;—and after the Countess left him, the oral utterance which he unguardedly gave to his own thoughts, made me acquainted with the startling fact that he was purchasing his pardon at *your* hands, as the price of placing the Countess in your power."

"The incautious fool!—the idiot!" muttered the Prince. "His folly has wrought all this mischief!"

"Speak out anything you may have to say in comment upon my explanations," cried Meagles: "I do not like those mutterings. Ramsey, you now perceive, has acted foolishly—but not treacherously. When once acquainted with the plot in which you were to figure so conspicuously, I was not the man at all likely to let it pass without an attempt to turn it to my own purposes. I therefore deliberated with the Amazon; and we settled the manner of proceeding. The course indeed was plain and facile enough. I came just now to Stamford Manor, and watched near the garden wall until I saw you enter. I knew your gait, disguised though you were. Then I went round to the front-door and demanded an interview with the Earl. In a few words I explained to him that a trap had been laid to ensnare his wife, and that the Prince of Wales was the intended ravisher or seducer, as the case might be. I stipulated with the Earl that he was to leave me to manage your Royal Highness, as I had an account to settle with you;—and you have just seen how faithfully Lord Desborough has fulfilled his portion of the compact. He does not know, and very probably does not care, whether I mean to send the contents of this pistol through your royal head, or not."

"Can it be possible that the Earl of Desborough has abandoned me to this insult — if to nothing worse?" exclaimed the Prince, almost writhing upon his chair.

"Was it likely that he would remain to thank your Royal Highness for attempting to ravish his wife?" demanded Meagles, with a sneer. "But you do not yet understand how it is that I am in a position to inflict summary vengeance upon you, purely and simply on my own account and that of the Amazon, without incurring the slightest personal danger. Well, I will explain that point as succinctly and as truthfully as I have already informed you how I became aware of the conspiracy wherein yourself and Ramsey have so pleasantly figured. Let us suppose a case. A husband is drawn to a particular room in his house, by hearing his wife scream: he finds her in the arms, not of a mere seducer — but of a ravisher; — and he

blows out the brains of the said ravisher upon the spot. *You*, who have already reminded me of the law of high treason, should be equally well instructed on another point of the English code—which is, that a husband acting in such a manner and under such circumstances, is held to be fully justified by the facts—although the ravisher whom he kills on the spot, be the heir-apparent to the British throne!"

"Good God! can the Earl have employed *you* to assassinate me?" exclaimed the Prince, endeavouring to rise from his chair as all the fearful truth of Meagles' statement burst upon him with overwhelming force: but, crushed by his fears, he sank back again upon the seat, an ice-like tremor shooting through his frame and a cold sweat bursting forth upon his forehead.

"The Earl has done nothing of the kind," responded Meagles: "but he has sworn to follow, with a blind obedience, any course which I may choose to dictate. If, then, I kill you upon the spot, the Earl will stand boldly forth before the world, and, taking upon himself the responsibility of the deed, will declare that in an instant of ungovernable wrath, and not observing who the individual was, he slew the ravisher of his wife!"

"Meagles—my dear Meagles, wherefore should we remain at variance?" cried the Prince, in an imploring tone. "You would not do me an injury—much less carry your vindictiveness to such a point as——But, no—I cannot think it—I dare not contemplate such a horror——"

"And yet you had no remorse for me, when you exerted your secret influence to procure my expatriation," said Meagles, adopting a stern tone: "nor did you manifest the slightest compunction when you sent and ransacked the dwelling of Lady Lade, your myrmidons performing their mission so brutally that they caused the death of the old man to whom she owed so much. Nor pitying her on that account, did you express sorrow or contrition for what had taken place: but you even menaced her with that cowardly virulence which so eminently characterises you. Oh! I have already told your Royal Highness that you are a thorough-paced rascal: and I now tell you, in addition thereto, that you are an accomplished bully."

The heir-apparent winced fearfully under this cutting language;—but his terrors began to evaporate—for he felt assured that Meagles would not prolong the discourse in this manner if he intended to wreak a bloody vengeance. He knew, in fact, that his former friend was naturally good-hearted and generous, and that he was the last individual in existence to perpetrate a deed of deliberate cruelty and wanton atrocity. At the same time, although the Prince thus gathered courage from the reflections which he had now acquired presence of mind sufficient to make, he was not blind to the necessity of using a conciliatory tone and forbearing policy towards the man who still retained the murderous weapon in his grasp,—a weapon the discharge of which might be provoked by defiance or irritation.

"Mr. Meagles," said the Prince, "will you inform me at once the nature of the atonement you require at my hands and the reparation which you expect me to make?"

"In the first place," replied Tim, drawing forth a sheet of paper from his pocket, and reaching down a China inkstand from the mantel, "you will have the kindness to write according to my dictation. Nay—do not fear that I am going to push matters to any extraordinary verge: I shall not compromise you farther than I may deem consistent with prudence and propriety."

"But of what nature is the document I am to draw up?" demanded the Prince, growing bolder now that he felt his way so far as to ascertain that Meagles himself was ready to effect a compromise.

"Leave that to me to dictate," was the stern reply. "And now, Prince of Wales, let me warn you to beware how you attempt to trifle with me in any respect—much less refuse to obey me in the present instance."

"Obey you?" echoed the Prince, mustering up courage enough for the purpose of a last endeavour to assert his authority and overawe the enemy.

"Yes—*obey* me, I said," responded Meagles, in a still sterner tone. "For the man who holds the life of his foe at his disposal, can dictate his own terms. Such are our relative positions. And now be seated at this table—and prepare to write."

The Prince hesitated a moment—but only a moment: for the sharp click of the pistol as Meagles cocked it, fell upon his ear and made his coward heart sink within him. He accordingly placed himself at the table—took up the pen—and began to write to the dictation of Meagles, who now stood close by the chair in which his Royal Highness was seated.

The dictation of the triumphant Tim was to the following effect:—

"I, the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby acknowledge that, without just provocation of any kind, and simply because Mr. Timothy Meagles is acquainted with many private and secret matters which it would be inconvenient to me to have divulged, I did treacherously and falsely cause certain unfounded charges of sedition to be preferred at the Home Office against the said Timothy Meagles, with a view to procure his deportation to a foreign land;—that those charges had the desired effect, the result being the expatriation of the said Mr. Meagles on a warrant from the Home Office, and without any regular form of legal and constitutional trial;—that, subsequently influenced by threats of exposure at the hands of one of the said Timothy Meagles' most devoted friends, I procured the revocation of the arbitrary sentence pronounced upon him;—that in order to testify my deep regret and thorough contrition for the course which I so despotically pursued, and likewise to afford the injured party such satisfaction as shall prevent him from seeking redress by any means which would result in the exposure of my conduct, I hereby bind myself to pay to the said Timothy Meagles the sum of twenty thousand pounds within one month from the date hereof;—and lastly, I do declare that this document has been drawn up by my own free will, in my own handwriting, and under no other influence than that of my own spontaneous desire to afford full and complete satisfaction to Mr. Timothy Meagles for the grievous injury which he has sustained at my hands.

"*Dated, the 17th day of May*, 1795."

The reader must not suppose that his Royal Highness penned the above document without much wincing at some passages and many remonstrances against others: but on each occasion when he stopped to exhibit either hesitation or anger, or to beseech a mitigation in the pointed severity of the terms in which he was made to speak of his own conduct, the inexorable Meagles presented the pistol to his head and sternly commanded him to proceed. Nothing, therefore, could possibly exceed

the humiliation of that haughty, arrogant, and vindictive man: and at the same time, nothing could exceed the calm and resolute determination which Meagles evinced in thus reducing him to obedience.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the discomfited Prince, scarcely able to subdue his rage, and utterly unable to conceal his mortification,—"I suppose that when I have signed this, you will suffer me to depart?"

"One moment!" ejaculated Tim: "you must not take me for such a fool as to imagine that I will receive a paper which to-morrow morning you would denounce as a forgery. It must be regularly attested: and where can we find a better witness than the nobleman whom you have outraged, and whose vengeance will in some degree be satisfied by the spectacle of your humiliation? Have the kindness to remain here for a few minutes while I proceed in search of the Earl of Desborough."

And without waiting to hear the remonstrance which the Prince began to utter against the plan now suggested, Meagles opened the door—quitted the room—locked the door on the outside—and took away the key in his pocket.

The miserable Prince groaned aloud: then, starting from his chair, he began to pace the room in a condition of fearful mental excitement.

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While this extraordinary scene had been taking place in the parlour where we have just left his Royal Highness a close prisoner, certain explanations were passing between the Earl and Countess of Desborough.

This nobleman, on rescuing his wife from the power of the royal voluptuary, had immediately conducted her to her own apartment, where she sank upon a sofa and gave way to a flood of tears.

The Earl said nothing: not a syllable of either reproach or consolation issued from his lips;—for he was as yet unaware how far his wife merited sympathy, or to what extent her conduct had incurred his blame. The explanations which he had received from Meagles, were necessarily so brief, hurried, and meagre, that his ideas relative to the incident of the evening were confined to the mere knowledge that the criminal Ramsey had returned to England—that he had induced the Countess to grant him a first interview in St. James's Park and a second at Stamford Manor—and that the Prince of Wales was to become his substitute on the latter occasion.

The fit of weeping into which Eleanor burst on being conducted to her apartment, relieved her surcharged bosom and afforded an issue for the fury of all those pent-up feelings that had been agitating her while arguing, reasoning, and eventually battling with the Prince. But one of the first effects of that relief was to afford her leisure to contemplate the position in which she now stood with regard to her husband.

"Francis," she said, in a low and tremulous voice, as she rose from the sofa and accosted the Earl, "do you believe that I encouraged the visit of the Prince to your house?—do you imagine that he came hither by my invitation?"

"I am certain that he did *not*," replied the nobleman, with a mournful gravity of speech and manner: "for I have learnt enough to afford me a glimpse of the whole plot. In a word, Philip Ramsey is in England——"

"Ah! then you know all," ejaculated Eleanor; "and I am spared the pain of much disagreeable explanation. But before another word passes between us, read this," she added, drawing from her bosom the note which she had written in the afternoon: and as she presented it to her husband, the pallor of her countenance changed into the glow of confidence and satisfaction.

The Earl opened the billet, which was addressed to himself, and read as follows:—

"My dearest husband,

"I write these few lines in order to save myself from a fatal misconception on your part, should you by any means obtain a clue to the deplorable circumstances which are now enmeshing me. A person whose name I cannot—dare not commit to paper, has returned to England, and has demanded a last interview with me, as the sole condition upon which he will molest me no more. Overawed by the horrors of past reminiscences, and subdued by the weight of present fears, I have yielded to his desire. But I have prepared weapons to defend myself against the slightest insult;—and I will mercilessly slay that man, if he dare to approach me otherwise than with respect.

"Should he adhere to his solemn promise and content himself with the gratification of that passing whim which has induced him to solicit this interview,—namely, that he may contemplate me for a few moments and for the last time,—it is my intention to keep all this proceeding a secret from my husband. Wherefore afflict him by the revival of the most painful reminiscences? 'Tis I alone who should suffer for the past!

"But should that man drive me to desperation,—should this interview lead to some deplorable catastrophe,—then whatever may be the circumstances, this note will convince you, my dearest husband, that I am true to the pledge which I made you when receiving your forgiveness for my weakness—my frailty—my crime, in regard to *that man!*

"Your affectionate wife,
"ELEANOR."

"This goes far—very far to acquit you in one respect," said the Earl of Desborough, when he had perused the extraordinary billet: "but in another——And yet," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself, "I know not by what right I dare question your actions, wretched being that I am!"

"Speak—my God! speak," cried Eleanor, clinging to his arm and gazing up wistfully into his countenance. "What do you mean?—how am I open to suspicion? Return to the room whence you have ere now led me away—and upon the floor you will find a broken dagger—on the table the pistol damped with water. Those were the weapons which I had secreted there, and which I would have used against the Prince himself—yes, all Prince though he be—had he not discovered them in the place where they were concealed."

"Oh! if this were true, Eleanor," cried the Earl, "it would be indeed a proof——But you were in the adjacent chamber—and the lights were there," exclaimed the nobleman, once more interrupting himself, as dark suspicions returned to his mind.

"It was in a moment of utter prostration of all mental and bodily powers," said the Countess, now profoundly afflicted at the turn which the conversation was taking,—"that the Prince hastened with the candles into the adjoining room and then bore me thither in his arms. But did I not shriek for help? My brain is becoming confused—and yet methinks that I sent forth a cry of terror——"

"True, true—'tis true, Eleanor—my own dear Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, catching with the enthusiasm of delicious joy at that evidence of his wife's fidelity in the adventure of the evening. "And you were struggling in the arms of the Prince——yes—I remember it all now! But I was bewildered—excited—confused——"

"Oh! you can form no idea of the extent to which *my* feelings have been this day wrung!" interrupted Eleanor, clasping her hands together in anguish at the bare recollection of all she had endured. "But tell me that you have confidence in me—that you forgive me for having kept my sorrows and their cause a secret from you——"

"Forgive you, my poor Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, pressing her fervidly in his arms: "I was wrong to suspect you even for a moment, after the perusal of that letter! 'Tis for you to pardon me—yes, *me*—for I have been the true source of all your afflictions——"

"Hush! not a word relative to the past," murmured Eleanor, placing her hand upon her husband's lips and concealing her blushing, burning countenance upon his breast.

"Oh! but it requires so little to lay bare again the wound in my heart that nothing can ever heal entirely!" exclaimed the Earl, in a tone of bitter, bitter anguish. "Had I not made you a victim to my insane love—had I not wooed you, young and impassioned as you are, to bind yourself to my side, miserable wretch that I am—you would have become the happy wife of some man who would not have blushed to look you in the face! Then the *one* tremendous incident of your life would never have occurred—your whole destiny would have flowed in another and happier channel—and the accursed wretch whom the very grave seemed to have yielded up to tempt you, would have remained unknown to you save by name!"

"My God! let us not revive the past," exclaimed Eleanor, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh! do not reproach yourself thus!—do not accuse yourself of evils which you never could have foreseen!—do not lift all the blame from my shoulders, in order to take the burthen so generously upon your own!"

But the Earl—the unhappy Earl—continued to deplore his sad fate in the most piteous terms, until the big tears began to roll down his cheeks also: and then Eleanor redoubled her consolations, and lavished upon him such tender caresses that he felt the genial balm of a holy comfort gradually stealing into his wounded soul.

"And now tell me, my dear Francis," said the Countess, "how Mr. Meagles became your companion in this night's adventure—for that gentleman is known to me by sight, and I instantaneously recognised him when you both burst so opportunely into the chamber!"

"When you retired from the dinner-table, Eleanor," returned the nobleman, "I repaired to the library; and soon after nine o'clock one of the servants came to inform me that a gentleman wished to see me immediately upon the most pressing business. I ordered him to be shown into my presence: 'twas Mr. Meagles. In a few hurried words he stated that accident had brought to his knowledge a diabolical conspiracy having for its object the surrender of yourself into the arms of the Prince of Wales. You may conceive the mingled rage, excitement, and alarm into which this announcement plunged me;—and I demanded farther explanations. These were instantaneously given, but necessarily in a rapid and imperfect manner, so as to afford me little more than a partial glimpse into the plot. Nor did he at once inform me *where* and *when* the base attempt was to be made: but, previously to becoming explicit upon that head, he imposed a certain condition——"

"And that condition?" said the Countess, inquiringly.

"Was to the effect that provided he enabled me to rescue you from the toils and snares laid to entrap you, I should leave the Prince to be dealt with according to his will and pleasure, and that I should consent to become a witness to any document which he might think fit to compel his Royal Highness to sign. I swore to fulfil those conditions," added the Earl: "indeed, such was the excitement under which I laboured at the moment, and so great was my indignation against the Prince, that I should not have hesitated to pledge my soul to Satan, in order to accomplish your deliverance and appease the cravings of my own vengeance."

The Countess was on the point of making some remark with respect to the explanation just given by her husband, when a knock at the chamber door was heard. Lord Desborough answered the summons; and a servant informed him that Mr. Meagles requested a few moments' interview with his lordship. The nobleman accordingly hastened to the library where Meagles was anxiously awaiting his presence.

"Now, my lord," said Tim, "you will have the goodness to fulfil your portion of the compact. I have performed mine — and her ladyship was rescued from the power of that villanous Prince."

"I am ready to act as you require, Mr. Meagles," returned the nobleman; "and I thank you most sincerely—most heartily, for your conduct on this occasion. Where is the Prince?"

"In the suite of apartments that was to have proved the scene of his triumph," responded Meagles. "Let us hasten thither."

Lord Desborough accordingly led the way to the room in which his Royal Highness was held captive: and when the nobleman entered, followed by Tim Meagles, the royal voluptuary cast a rapid but searching look upon the Earl's countenance to ascertain, if possible, whether there were any hope in that quarter. But the nobleman's features wore a stern and implacable look;—and the Prince, with hastily-averted eyes, muttered to himself, "This wretched impotent will back Meagles in his extortion!"

While this galling reflection was traversing the brain of the heir-apparent, the Earl had caught at a glance the broken dagger and the useless pistol—those evidences of the truth of that narrative which he had received from the lips of his wife. A smile of satisfaction beamed for a moment upon his countenance: but repressing any display of feelings apart from the business now in hand, he flung a look of haughty defiance upon the Prince.

"Does your lordship intend to support this fellow Meagles in his vile endeavour at extortion?" demanded his Royal Highness, assuming a tone and demeanour of lofty arrogance.

"Silence!" cried Meagles, suddenly presenting

his pistol at the head of the heir-apparent: "or I will shoot you like a dog."

The Prince, recoiling in horror and affright, threw upon the Earl a glance of deep meaning—as if to ask whether he, an English peer, would countenance such treasonable conduct towards the heir-apparent. But in the cold stern look of Lord Desborough he perceived too plainly that he had nothing to hope: and, feeling that he was completely in the power of the remorseless Meagles and the outraged husband, he resumed his seat at the table on which the document lay.

"Read it aloud," said Tim, in an authoritative voice, as he pointed to the paper with one hand and levelled the pistol at the Prince with the other.

And the heir-apparent, profoundly humiliated,—but not possessing courage sufficient to resist the treatment to which he was so deservedly subjected—that coward, arrogant, unprincipled, and base-hearted Prince, we say, was compelled to yield a grovelling obedience to the dictates of the man whom he so cordially hated. In a hurried and tremulous tone, and with his cheeks flushing and growing pale by turns, did he read the document which stamped alike his treachery, his cowardice, and his humiliation.

"Now sign it," said Meagles, in a short and abrupt tone of command; "and beware how you venture to indulge in any observations at all injurious to either the Earl of Desborough or myself."

The Prince attached his signature to the document, which the nobleman unhesitatingly attested in the usual style: and Meagles secured the paper about his person.

While he was doing this, the Prince of Wales, plucking up a little courage—to which, by the bye, he was only incited by the goadings of his malignant vindictiveness—seized the opportunity to

whisper in the Earl's ear, "I will be terribly avenged for this! To-morrow all London shall know that Lord Desborough is a miserable impotent, and that his wife has been the mistress of the resuscitated felon Ramsey."

The nobleman became pale as a corpse and staggered back as if struck by a death-blow: but, instantaneously recovering himself, he replied in a low hoarse tone, "Do so—and in the evening I will declare in the House of Lords the conditions upon which that same Philip Ramsey procured a pardon through the interest of the Prince of Wales!"

"Ah! what is that whispering?" suddenly exclaimed Meagles, clutching his Royal Highness forcibly by the arm.

"The Prince menaces me," was the calm observation made by the Earl.

"I thought as much!" ejaculated Meagles. "But, by heavens! we will be terribly avenged upon him, if he dare injure a hair of your lordship's head. And now begone, you Prince of Rascals!" added the indignant Tim, pushing his Royal Highness violently towards the door.

The infuriate Prince would have blurted forth some vindictive menace: but his lips were sealed by the terror of having the contents of the pistol sent after him. The vengeance of Meagles was not however quite completed yet: one last humiliation he burned to inflict upon his royal adversary;—and yet he wavered for a moment. But only for a moment!—the temptation was too strong, and the provocation he had in various ways received was too great, not to overcome all momentary scruples. Accordingly, he placed the pistol upon the mantel—bounded after the Prince—and, applying his foot to the nethermost quarter of the royal voluptuary, kicked him down the stairs.

Oh! crowning infamy—supreme humiliation! A yell of mingled pain and rage burst from the lips of his Royal Highness;—and his retreat by means of the private door of Stamford Manor was accomplished with an almost incredible celerity.

"Now, Mr. Meagles," said the Earl of Desborough, when Tim returned, laughing heartily, to the parlour, after having performed the foregoing feat,—"you must permit me to offer you some testimonial of my gratitude for the service which you have rendered me this night."

"I want nothing, my lord," responded Tim. "You have already done enough for me by attesting this document and thereby confirming its validity beyond all possibility of dispute on the part of the Prince."

"But inasmuch as you exhibit such a marvellous aptitude for the somewhat difficult task of coping with that unprincipled voluptuary," resumed the Earl,—"and as I myself have no inclination to spare him in the slightest degree, I fancy that a certain little acknowledgment which I possess, and which bears his signature, would prove more useful in your hands than in mine. Without farther preface, therefore, I beg your acceptance of this receipt for twenty thousand pounds, in which the Prince is indebted to me;—and I hope you will succeed in recovering the amount."

"By heavens! this is a gift not to be refused," exclaimed Meagles: "and yet it is a reward a thousand times greater than I can either deserve or look for," added Meagles, as he glanced with sparkling eyes and joyous features over the I.O.U. which the Prince had given the Earl on that memorable night of his sojourn at Desborough House.

"You need not hesitate to accept it—and I require no thanks," said Eleanor's husband. "I should never think of enforcing payment thereof on my own account: but you will not have the same scruples. I bestow it upon you, not only as a proof of gratitude, but likewise as a means of punishing an unprincipled voluptuary."

"On those conditions, my lord, I accept the handsome gift," exclaimed Meagles: "and depend upon it, his Royal Highness shall be speedily brought to book."

Meagles then took leave of the Earl of Desborough, and repaired to the way-side public-house where Wasp had been left in charge of the horses.

CHAPTER CXCIII.

THE SECRET CONCLAVE.

It was about six o'clock in the evening, three or four days after the occurrences just related, that four persons were absorbed in earnest conversation in a small but well-furnished parlour in Bury Street, St. James's.

One was a venerable-looking old man, with white hair, and a demeanour that was at once imposing and calculated to inspire a profound respect. He was dressed in a somewhat old-fashioned style, but with a remarkable precision and neatness; and in the button-hole of his lapelling double-breasted coat he wore the riband of a foreign order.

The second individual in this group was a fine, tall, handsome man, in the prime of life, but with a certain air of dissipation and debauchery beneath the gentility of his appearance. His manners were those of a polished courtier: his apparel was in the best possible taste;—and yet there was a something about him, which, to the eye of the keen observer accustomed to look deeper than the surface, denoted the accomplished rake and finished voluptuary.

The third was a still younger man, of equally aristocratic appearance with the two individuals just presented to our readers—dressed as fashionably and as elegantly as the second—and having all the seriousness of countenance which characterised the first. His age could not have exceeded thirty;—and yet his discourse was as measured, his air as grave, and his demeanour as imposing as if he were far more advanced along the pathway of life.

The first mentioned individual was the Marquis de Saint Croix—the second was the Marquis de Bellois—the third the Duke de Villebelle: and the person who made the fourth in the little knot of deliberators, was the reader's old friend, Mr. Page.

The three first were French noblemen who had been compelled to fly from their native land, on account of their aristocratic station and their political opinions. The Marquis de Saint Croix was the one who had lent twenty thousand pounds to the Prince of Wales a few months previously, at the instigation of the Amazon: the Marquis de Bellois was the object of Mrs. Fitzherbert's passing amour during that lady's temporary residence in

France;—and the Duke of Villebelle was an enthusiastic young nobleman, devoted to the lost cause of Royalty in France, and whose immense estates had been confiscated by the Republican Government of that country.

The room where these refugee nobles were assembled in company with Mr. Page, formed a portion of the lodging rented in the house by the Marquis de Saint Croix;—and the motive of the conference was none other than to devise and project certain schemes for raising once again the Royalist banner in France. The deliberations were chiefly conducted in English, with which the noblemen happened to be tolerably well acquainted: otherwise Mr. Page would have found himself unable to take part in the proceedings, he being utterly ignorant of the French language.

"My lords," said the Marquis of Saint Croix, addressing his two fellow-countrymen, "I will now repeat in the presence of our English friend everything that I have learnt from his lips, and which I have already made known to your lordships—so that should I have either misunderstood or exaggerated any portion of the important communications for which we are indebted to Mr. Page, he can at once set us right upon the subject. I believe, then, that I am correctly informed when I state that Mr. Page is deep in the confidence of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and that his Royal Highness is most anxious for an attempt to be made in favour of the restoration of Royalty in unhappy, distracted France. Is it not so?"

"Your lordship has stated the matter exactly as it stands," replied Mr. Page, assuming the grave and solemn air that was proper to the deliberations. "Not only does his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales feel the necessity of restoring order in France and rebuilding a legitimate government," he continued, adopting the detestable cant terms and smooth-sounding phrases which are used as a cloak for the most damnable tyrannies and a pretext for all anti-democratic proceedings, —"but the whole Royal Family of England and our blessed Aristocracy partake in the sentiments of the Prince. Under these circumstances his Royal Highness instructed me a fortnight back to throw myself in the way of the most eminent French refugees now residing in London, and sound their views and intentions. Accident led me in the first instance to address myself to his lordship the Marquis of Saint Croix, and secondly to my lord the Marquis of Bellois——"

"And then *we* communicated with your lordship," added Saint Croix, glancing towards the Duke of Villebelle; "and your lordship, with characteristic patriotism, hastened to respond to our appeal."

"God speed our aims, my friends," said the Duke, his pale but handsome countenance flushing with ardent hope.

"The interest which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales takes in the affairs of our unhappy country," continued the Marquis of Saint Croix, "is not only most grateful to our feelings, but likewise prompts us to behold the character of his Royal Highness in a new and very favourable light. I must confess that until I became acquainted with Mr. Page, I had experienced some cause to mistrust his Royal Highness and doubt his integrity: but after all the explanations which Mr. Page has given me in his wonted honest and straight-forward manner, and especially after hearing how deeply the Prince is interesting himself in the affairs of distracted France, I have learnt to form a better opinion of the Prince."

"Your lordship had been tutored to think ill of him by that infamous and notorious character, Lady Lade," observed the ex-bagman; "and the statements she made to your lordship appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that his Royal Highness did not immediately restore the money your lordship had placed in his hands. But when I assure your lordship that the Prince will in a few days——"

"No more upon that subject, Mr. Page!" exclaimed the Marquis de Saint Croix. "I deeply regret that I should ever have listened to the insidious and malignant representations of that woman to whose faults my late friend Sir John Lade was so unaccountably blind. I am sorry also that I should ever have persecuted his Royal Highness for the return of money which I did not precisely want, and which I never should want again if the legitimate Monarchy were restored in France."

"His Royal Highness has been enabled to glean much valuable information, I believe, respecting France, from the English Minister of Foreign Affairs?" said the Duke of Villebelle, addressing himself to Mr. Page.

"Such is the fact, may it please your Grace," returned the ex-bagman. "The English Government has for a long time past employed numerous secret agents—or in plainer terms, spies—to travel through some parts of France and fix their abodes in other districts, for the purpose of ascertaining the true feeling of the French people with regard to the existing institutions of the country. The reports that are received at the Foreign Office are numerous and interesting; and their contents are regularly, though privately, communicated to the Prince of Wales. From those reports his Royal Highness has gleaned the most encouraging information with regard to the cause of Monarchy in France; and he feels convinced that if the Royalist banner were raised amidst the fields of La Vendée, hundreds of thousands would enthusiastically flock around it."

"Then hurrah for La Vandée!" exclaimed the Marquis de Bellois, who, being a man of desperate fortunes and as dissipated as he looked, was ready for any enterprise that seemed to promise an amendment of his circumstances. "Your lordship," he added, turning towards the Duke of Villebelle, "has managed to bring over a large sum from France: and that will be enough to commence the undertaking. Money constitutes the sinews of war; and your fifty thousand pounds sterling, now existing in good English Bank notes, if changed into French five-franc pieces, will raise an army of ten thousand men in a short time. Then the Royalists will rush to our banner: their treasures will be drawn forth from the places where they are concealed or buried;—and the accursed Republicans will have to rue the day when a Villebelle, a Saint Croix, and a Bellois put themselves at the head of the movement."

"But if we were to resolve upon quitting England and passing into La Vendée," said the Duke de Villebelle, "we should not be so rash as to take all the available funds with us. We must leave them

leposited with some trustworthy individual in London, to be sent after us by the best possible means, so soon as we found that we were really certain of receiving the support of the leading men in La Vendée."

"His Grace speaks wisely and prudently," observed Mr. Page. "That is the proper course to pursue!"

"Well, my lords," said the Marquis de Saint Croix, "are we resolved upon making the attempt?—shall we at once come to the decision of repairing without delay to our own native land, at all perils and at all risks? For my part, I will be the first to give my vote in the affirmative."

"And I have already intimated my readiness to join in the expedition," observed the Marquis de Bellois. "We will either restore the throne or give our heads to the guillotine."

"Amen," said the Duke of Villebelle, solemnly. "And now, my lords, we have two points to determine upon. The first is, when shall we set off?—and the second is, to whom shall we entrust the money which I have at present lying in a London bank?"

"With regard to the first point," said De Bellois, "I should advise that no unnecessary delay take place. In fact, I am prepared to start to-morrow morning."

"I may as well observe," exclaimed Mr. Page, "at this stage of the proceedings,—I mean, since the money question is about to be touched upon,—that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales authorised me this very day to assure the Marquis de Saint Croix that the twenty thousand pounds due to his lordship shall be paid in a week's time. I was about to mention this fact just now, when his lordship bade me speak no more upon the subject. But the incident becomes of importance at this stage of the proceedings, inasmuch as I shall cheerfully hold myself bound to undertake a trip to La Vendeé and convey to his lordship the Marquis the sum of money to which I am referring."

"Your conduct, Mr. Page, is most admirable!" exclaimed the venerable Marquis de Saint Croix, seizing him by the hand and pressing it warmly. "*You* also, then, must feel profoundly interested in our cause, as well as your royal patron, the Prince of Wales?"

"I will throw myself heart and soul into it," said Mr. Page, affecting the fervour of enthusiasm. "It is the cause of order against chaos—justice against anarchy. You may command me, my lords, in all respects—humble an individual though I be."

The Duke of Villebelle and the Marquis de Bellois followed the example of the venerable Saint Croix by offering due acknowledgments to Mr. Page for his seeming devotion to their cause;—and then the three nobles began to converse together for a few minutes in their own native language—but not without having previously apologised to their English companion for this temporary exclusiveness in the deliberations.

"Mr. Page," at length said the Marquis de St. Croix, when the discussion in French was brought to a conclusion, "their lordships and myself have come to the determination to solicit, through your medium, a particular favour of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I have recommended this proceeding, in order to convince his Royal Highness of my deep repentance for having persecuted him with demands for the repayment of the amount due to me at a time when the Prince was really unable to meet my claim: and the Duke of Villebelle is anxious to afford his Royal Highness a proof of the importance which we attach to his countenance and co-operation in the projects now under discussion. In a word, then, Mr. Page, do you think that his Royal Highness would consent to become the guardian of the Duke of Villebelle's funds, until such time as we may have settled all our plans in La Vendée?"

"I could not possibly take it upon myself to return a positive answer," replied the ex-bagman, shaking his head gravely. "But if your lordships be anxious to have the point cleared up without delay, I will hasten to Carlton House at once and endeavour to obtain a few minutes' audience of his Royal Highness previous to the dinner-hour."

This proposal was welcomed with thanks; and Mr. Page immediately took his departure. But instead of repairing to Carlton House at all, he entered the nearest tavern, where he ordered and discussed a pint of sherry;—and having thus whiled away about half-an-hour, he returned to the noble refugees at the Marquis de Saint Croix' lodgings.

For the benefit of those who are not acquainted with London, we may as well observe that Bury Street was not more than five minutes' walk from Carlton House; and therefore Mr. Page had been quite long enough absent to induce a belief that he had succeeded in obtaining an interview with the Prince. He accordingly found the three noblemen on the tiptoe of expectation concerning the result of his mission: for they flattered themselves that the course which they had adopted with regard to the Prince would lead him to afford their cause all the assistance he might be enabled to vouchsafe it.

"I have succeeded, my lords," said Mr. Page, on returning to the apartment: "but not without some degree of difficulty. The Prince would not listen to the proposal at first: he declared that he would never again become the custodian of any foreign refugee's funds. But when I explained to his Royal Highness how necessary it was that some trustworthy treasurer should be found for the money, inasmuch as no London banker could at present undertake to remit large sums to France, especially in a secret manner,—and when I assured his Royal Highness that I was willing to convey the money over to La Vendée when the proper time should arrive, even though I might be compelled to undertake three or four journeys backward and forward for the purpose,—then did his Royal Highness yield to my representations and empower me to return to your lordships with an affirmative reply."

"We owe you a deep debt of gratitude, Mr. Page," said the Duke of Villebelle. "It is a material point gained. But did his Royal Highness specify a time when I may wait upon him and deposit the funds in his hands?"

"To-morrow evening, at six o'clock, my lord," answered the ready-witted Mr. Page, who was the last man in existence to be at a loss for a satisfactory reply when one was needed.

"Thus far, then, are our plans settled, my lords," said the Duke de Villebelle. "We will now arrange the time of our departure from London and the route we shall adopt to enter France."

"I will therefore take my most respectful leave of your lordships," observed Mr. Page; "inasmuch as his Royal Highness has given me an important commission to execute for him, and my humble advice

will not be needed in respect to the points which your lordships are now about to discuss."

The ex-bagman accordingly took his departure; —and this time, on issuing forth from the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix, he bent his way direct to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CXCIV.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND HIS AGENT.—SHICKSTER SAL.

It was now eight o'clock in the evening; and the Prince of Wales had just quitted the dinner-table —for he was aware that Mr. Page was to call upon him at that hour. The ex-bagman was accordingly at once shown into the presence of his Royal Highness, whom he saluted with a bow that was as profoundly reverential and as servilely low as an eastern salaam.

"Well, Page—what news?" demanded the Prince, pointing to a chair near the sofa on which he himself was seated in a reclining posture.

"I have two pieces of excellent tidings for your Royal Highness," answered the busy, bustling, obsequious individual who had managed to thrust himself into the service of the Prince. "But first, may I be permitted most humbly to inquire whether your Royal Highness is at liberty this evening for a few hours?"

"Your letter of this morning contained a promise which induced me to put aside every appointment," returned the Prince. "Tell me, then, in a word—will Pauline be mine to-night?"

"Beyond all question, may it please your Royal Highness," was the immediate response.

"Egad! it does please me infinitely, I can assure you, friend Page," observed the heir-apparent. "And now, what of the refugees?"

"They have fallen completely into the views which I have studied to develop to them, your Royal Highness," answered Page. "It is not proper for a man to sing his own praises: but I flatter myself that I *may* take credit for having managed this business with no ordinary degree of tact and judgment. The Marquis de Saint Croix firmly believes that it was by mere accident I addressed myself to him in the first instance——"

"And the Marquis de Bellois?" exclaimed the Prince, interrogatively.

"His lordship lies under a similar impression," rejoined Page: "that is to say, he supposes that it was without any sinister design that I fixed upon him as one of the most proper and fitting refugees to be sounded relative to the proposed incursion into France."

"And when I saw you the day before yesterday," observed the Prince, "you told me that those noblemen had taken a third into their confidence—the Duke of Villebelle. Is he also without suspicion?"

"Entirely, great Prince!" exclaimed the ex-bagman. "And of this he will afford your Royal Highness a sterling proof to-morrow evening, by depositing forty or fifty thousand pounds in your hands."

"The devil he will!" ejaculated the Prince, literally bounding upon the sofa with joy. "But how has this been brought about?"

Mr. Page now explained all that had just taken place at the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix —not omitting to state how he had absented himself for half-an-hour on pretence of obtaining the consent of his Royal Highness to become the depositary of the Duke's treasure.

"You have managed the business in a masterly style!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, rubbing his hands gleefully: then, after a few moments' pause, he said, "But how did you arrive at the conviction that I would agree to become the treasurer of these refugees?"

"If I have done wrong," answered Page, with a smile of sly significancy, "I implore the pardon of your Royal Highness."

"No, no, my good fellow," cried the Prince, laughing; "you have not done wrong—very far from it. But you are a man of keen penetration."

"Somewhat so, illustrious patron!" returned Page. "Your Royal Highness condescended to inform me that you were anxious to be avenged upon the Marquis de Saint Croix for persecuting you on account of that paltry sum which he placed in your royal hands; and that the same vindictive sentiment was extended towards the Marquis de Bellois, for a reason which your Royal Highness did *not* explain, and which I of course do not attempt to penetrate. Well, when I found that these noblemen had fallen so admirably into the snare laid for them, and that they had so innocently drawn the Duke of Villebelle into the meshes spread out to catch themselves, I thought within myself that if some one must profit in the long run by being the depositary of the Duke's wealth, your Royal Highness should be that fortunate individual. Therefore, I took the liberty of declaring that your Royal Highness would accept the trust."

"I again repeat that you are a man of great penetration," said the Prince; "and I may add that you will do honour to the Order of Knighthood."

The ex-bagman rose from his seat and made three distinct bows, each more profound than the former.

"And now tell me about Pauline," exclaimed the Prince.

"For the first time since the removal of Octavia a month ago and upwards," replied Mr. Page, "Pauline has begun to exhibit a neighbourly feeling;—and my excellent wife has persuaded upon her to take tea with her this evening. The poor thing has doubtless begun to experience an intolerable loneliness; and she looks upon Mrs. Page as a kind-hearted, well-meaning creature, who can sympathise with her."

"Then she does not entertain the least suspicion that you were instrumental in procuring the confinement of her sister in a private mad-house?" said the Prince, interrogatively.

"She could not possibly have formed the remotest conjecture on the subject," returned Page. "It was all done so cleverly. A few guineas obtained the necessary certificates from a couple of drunken, profligate doctors, named Wigton and Smanks, who happen to be acquaintances of mine; —and they will not let the cat out of the bag for their own sakes. Then there is Dr. Burton, the keeper of the lunatic-asylum, who is still more directly interested in maintaining a profound secrecy relative to the transaction: for he would

not like to lose the three hundred a-year which I have undertaken to pay him on your Royal Highness's behalf, for the maintenance of Miss Octavia."

"And has Pauline given up wandering about the vicinage of the asylum where her sister is shut up?" asked the heir-apparent.

"Scarcely a day passes that she does not take a hackney-coach and repair to Stoke Newington to call at Dr. Burton's establishment and inquire for Octavia," responded Page. "But the doctor invariably assures her that some few weeks may yet elapse ere her sister's mind will be so far restored to a state of equanimity as to justify him in permitting an interview between them. And Pauline feels herself so utterly powerless in the matter, and has discovered that the law is so completely on the side of the course which has been adopted, that she now appears to have yielded resignedly to the progress of those events against which she can offer no effectual resistance. Ah! it is a capital law which allows an obnoxious or dangerous person to be locked up for life, on the certificates of a couple of bribeable doctors!"

"To be sure it is," exclaimed the Prince. "I do not know how we should get on in the world without the aid of such laws occasionally. The rich and the powerful, the titled and the great, Mr. Page, must have some means of keeping their enemies in subjection and disarming dangerous individuals of their sting."

"Your Royal Highness argues with the most perfect wisdom," said the obsequious Mr. Page. "But it is now getting on for nine o'clock," he observed, looking at his watch; "and Julia—that is to say, Mrs. Page—will presently make the young lady so safe that your Royal Highness will find no trouble in enjoying a blissful triumph."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Prince. "How does your wife intend to proceed?"

"At nine o'clock the supper-tray is to be taken up," answered the ex-bagman, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; "and whether Miss Pauline should fancy a glass of port, or a glass of sherry, or only a tumbler of mild porter, the result will be all the same: for our servant-girl is in the secret—she is trustworthy, and we can rely upon her——"

"I comprehend you," interrupted the Prince, the blood glowing in his veins as he feasted his salacious imagination upon the charms which he hoped that night to defoliate of their virgin innocence. "Come, let us be gone!"

The Prince accordingly summoned Germain, whom he directed to order a plain carriage to be got ready without delay; and in the course of a quarter of an hour his Royal Highness and Mr. Page were rolling along in the vehicle towards the Edgeware Road.

It was about half-past nine when the carriage stopped within a short distance of the ex-bagman's residence in Paradise Villas;—and Mr. Page entered the house first, to ascertain whether the contemplated treachery had been put into execution. The Prince remained in the vehicle: but he was not kept waiting many minutes—for his obsequious agent soon returned with the welcome intelligence that Miss Pauline Clarendon was in a condition that left her entirely at his mercy.

The Prince, scarcely able to restrain his joy at the idea of experiencing the speedy consummation of all his lustful hopes in that quarter, now alighted from the carriage and followed Mr. Page into the house.

The vehicle, according to orders previously issued, then drove away.

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In the meantime a scene which we must here pause to relate, was occurring in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Page's abode.

Seated at a table in the tap-room of a low public house, the Gallows' Widow, the Kinchin-Grand, and Carrotty Poll were engaged in an earnest conversation, which they carried on in whispers. They were alone together in that room; and the landlord of the house was none other than their old accomplice Briggs, who by means of an immense wig and a pair of green spectacles was enabled to defy the penetration of the keenest thief-taker in the metropolis. The two women and the Kinchin-Grand therefore felt perfectly at home at the sign of the *Black Boy*: but the habit of caution, combined with the fear of being overheard by any chance customer who might enter the house, prompted them to conduct their deliberations in a low voice and a guarded manner.

The Kinchin-Grand was as shabby and ill-looking as ever: and the naturally vixenish temper of Carrotty Poll appeared to have derived a keener edge from the misfortunes which had overtaken her sire, the Big Beggarman, who was then in gaol awaiting his trial for piracy, murder, and heaven only knows how many other crimes. As for the Gallows' Widow, the reader may rest assured that she was not rendered more amiable or forbearing towards her enemies by the position of her paramour the Magsman, who was in a predicament precisely similar to that of Stephen Price. She had for some time past abandoned her mourning garb, and was attired in a plain unassuming manner, not altogether deficient in neatness.

"Well," said Carrotty Poll, after a glass of hot spirits-and-water had been passed round, "we are now at length in a fair way to be revenged somewhat on those cursed Pages, and also to get a certain high personage completely into our power."

"And if everything turns out as we expect," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her usual quiet way, "your father, Poll, and my flash man will be certain to be got off some how or another."

"Now, my fair friends," said the Kinchin-Grand, exultingly, "you'll admit that I was the chap to give you the adwice which has put things in such a glorious train. When you wanted to cut the throats of that scoundrel Page and his precious wife Julia, didn't I tell you that it was no good risking your necks for sich-like scum?—and didn't I say that if you'd only plant a spy upon 'em, they was such intriguing, cunning, money-making folks, you'd soon find out somethink about their proceedin's worth turnin' to your own account? I'm glad you gave way to my adwice in the matter; and now you'll reap the benefit of it. Ah! it was a capital dodge making Shickster Sal dress herself up neat and nice and apply at their house for a sitiwation as a maid-of-all-work! There never was a better spree in all the world: and then the false character which she got made everthing right at once."

"Well, well," interrupted Carrotty Poll, petulantly; "what is the use of reminding us of all that has been done in the matter? We don't deny that your plan has worked well, Bill——"

"On the contrary," said the Gallows' Widow, "we give you all possible credit for it. Indeed, if things turn out to-night as we expect, it will be through having adopted your advice that we shall save Poll's father and Joe Warren from swinging at Execution Dock. So you perceive, Bill, that I at least am not unmindful of the great service you will have rendered us. I suppose your young woman can be fully relied upon?"

"Like bricks and mortar," answered the Kinchin-Grand. "There isn't a better gal in all the world, though I say it, than the Shickster. Why, you may judge for yourselves, I think. Hasn't she given us every information of all wot has been passing at the Pages' house for the last month—indeed, from the fust day she succeeded in getting herself taken into their service as a maid-of-all-work:—and isn't it through her that we're awake to the dodge that's being practised to-night at their house? Ah! Mr. Page little thinks that the dirty drab he once saw with her arms round my neck at the *Kinchin-Ken* in Grub Street, is the same neat and tidy-looking gal which has been in his service for the last month! And it was a lucky thing, too, that Julia and Shickster Sal had never knowed each other. But here she is, by jingo!"

This ejaculation was elicited by the entrance of that same young creature whom we introduced to our readers in a very early chapter of this narrative, and whom we represented at the time to have received the flash name of *Shickster Sal* from the circumstance of having been tenderly brought up until she was enticed away from home and plunged into the loathsome vortex of profligacy. Her appearance was now much altered: she was apparelled with neatness—her person was cleanly—and she was far from being an ill-looking young woman. The respectable nature of her early training had enabled her to take with a prompt aptitude to the duties of the domestic situation which she was now filling in Mr. Page's house;—and her blind infatuation towards the Kinchin-Grand rendered her a suitable agent to carry out the designs of those who had suggested her introduction into that establishment.

"Well, my dear Sal," exclaimed her paramour, welcoming her with a caress; "what news?"

"It's all right," returned the young woman. "Miss Clarendon partook of the drugged wine—and the Prince has this moment arrived."

"Then there's no time to be lost!" said Carrotty Poll, springing from her seat. "Lead the way, Sal—there's a dear—and we'll follow at a little distance."

"You'll come round to the back gate, mind," was the injunction now given by Shickster Sal: "and don't be more than a couple of minutes after me."

She then hurried away;—and the three accomplices whom she left behind in the tap-room, exchanged looks of exulting triumph.

"Isn't she a regular blessin' to a man, that gal?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand, who was far more proud of her than he would have been, were she a paragon of moral excellence.

The Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll both passed some compliments upon the dexterity, astuteness, and fidelity of Shickster Sal;—and the Kinchin-Grand was hugely delighted at the encomia thus lavished upon his mistress. He and the two women then quitted the tap-room—nodded significantly to Briggs as they passed by the bar where he was serving his customers—and issued from the public-house.

Skirting the row of gardens attached to Paradise Villas, ran a narrow lane into which the back gates of those little enclosures opened: and along this alley did the trio proceed at a rapid rate. On reaching the gate belonging to Page's garden, they found Shickster Sal waiting for them;—and with the utmost caution did she introduce them into the house.

CHAPTER CXCV.

THE INTRUDERS.

It was now past ten o'clock;—and lights were burning in a bed-chamber at Mr. Page's abode.

Upon the couch in that apartment lay Pauline Clarendon, completely dressed, but with her luxuriant hair all dishevelled. Having been prevailed upon by the treacherous Julia to take a glass of wine at supper, she had almost instantaneously fallen into a condition of complete stupefaction;—and in that state was she borne up to the bed-chamber by Mrs. Page and Shickster Sal, who had apparently lent herself with willingness to the infamous designs of her mistress.

Yes—upon that couch reposed the defenceless maiden,—utterly unconscious of the perils which environed her. Nothing could be more graceful than the total abandonment as it were to which her form was surrendered up: for precisely in the same position in which she had been deposited by Julia and the servant, was she now lying on that bed. Her garments, the least thing drawn up, revealed the well-shaped foot and the rounded ankle as far as the robust swell of the leg: her arms reposed in the motionless grace of a gentle curvature;—and her lips, slightly apart, afforded glimpses of the pearly teeth.

And over her leant the Prince of Wales: over that sleeping, almost inanimate form he leant—his eyes devouring her charms with a gloating avidity. As the boa-constrictor holds its prey in its hideous coils for a long time ere it appeases its appetite with the luscious festival—so did the reptile voluptuary feast his imagination with the delicious banquet of beauty that lay before him. His looks wandered slowly from that flood of dark brown hair which covered the pillow with its glossy luxuriance, to the cheeks that were deeply flushed by the influence of the narcotic;—thence to the snowy neck that was slightly arched as if softly yielding to the weight of the drooping head, as the stalk of a tulip retains a gentle curve even when snapped from its root and lying upon the ground. And from that beauteous neck of such dazzling whiteness, the sensuous eyes of the Prince wandered to the bosom, the rising and falling of which were so long and slow, as if measured, and likewise so little perceptible. But he devoured with his satyr looks as much of those round white globes as Pauline's modest dress left revealed;—and the

undulations which the dress itself took from the rich contours of her bust, enabled him to finish and complete in his imagination the fine proportions of those hills of snow. In sooth, the entire spectacle of that exquisitely modelled form, stretched with all the abandonment of its flowing length of limb upon the couch, was enough to overcome the scruples of a saint, much less excite almost to madness the furious desires of that royal voluptuary.

For several minutes did he contemplate the lovely being whom he now fancied to be entirely in his power: for several minutes did he gloat over the glorious creature whom he looked upon as a sure and certain victim to his burning lusts. He stooped down—he was about to fasten his lips to that mouth which was so rich in its moist redness—he was on the point of sucking in the pure fragrance of the breath that came slowly and heavily: when, hark! a sound is heard—the handle of the door is turning—that door which he had forgotten to fasten!

But even while still bending over the sleeping beauty, he paused and listened, without absolutely raising himself to his wonted upright carriage: for he fancied that his ears must have deceived him. Another moment—and the door opens—and footsteps are stealing in! He starts—he springs to an upright posture—he turns hastily round—and he beholds intruders of no welcome aspect entering the apartment!

"Away with you!" exclaimed the Prince, advancing towards Carrotty Poll, the Gallows' Widow, and the Kinchin-Grand. "Depart this moment—or I will give the alarm that thieves are in the house."

"You don't dare do it, Prince of Wales," said Carrotty Poll. "If so, you'd only be exposing yourself."

"But who are you?—and what do you require?" demanded his Royal Highness, who had stamped his foot with vexation when the red-haired young woman's words showed that he was recognised by the intruders. "You want money, doubtless? Well, I will give you a few guineas——"

"No—we want to have a conversation with your Royal Highness on very particular business," interrupted the Gallows' Widow.

"With me?—and to-night? Impossible!" ejaculated the Prince, glancing towards the bed, on which Pauline Clarendon still lay steeped in unconsciousness.

"We mean with you—and we also mean to-night," said the Gallows' Widow, in her quiet but resolute tone. "In plain terms, our presence here just at the very moment when you thought of being happy,"—and she flung a significant look towards Pauline,—"is not a mere accident. It is altogether a planned and pre-arranged thing."

"What! has that scoundrel Page been playing me false?" cried the Prince, now trembling for the safety of the *other* secrets of which the ex-bagman was the depositary. "By heaven! I will be signally avenged for this!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, petulantly. "Page has got nothing at all to do with it. On the contrary, he and his wife are safely and securely locked in the parlour down stairs—and their own servant girl is mounting guard over them with a horse-pistol. So your Royal Highness perceives that all proper precautions have been taken."

"But once more, who are you?—and what do you want?" demanded the heir-apparant, every instant becoming more and more troubled by the mysterious words and self-sufficient manner of these intruders.

"I'll speak fust, most illustrious Prince," said the Kinchin-Grand, taking off his hat with mock ceremony. "Know, then, that I'm a sort of Prince in my way: that is, I'm captain of as jolly a pack of juvenile rogues and rascals, prostitutes and thieves, as ever was met together in this blessed country. They call me the Kinchin-Grand: and I'm wery much at the service of your Royal Highness, if you ever want anything done in my way."

"Enough, sir!" ejaculated the Prince, turning from the young reprobate in loathing and disgust. "Now, my good women, who are you?—and what do you require of me? Be explicit and brief—and let us put as speedy an end as possible to this business."

"My name is Mary Price," said Carrotty Poll; "and I am the daughter of a certain Stephen Price, better known in some places as the Big Beggarman."

"And I am the mistress of one Joseph Warren, better known as the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, keenly watching the effect which this announcement would produce upon his Royal Highness.

The Prince had started visibly when the name of the Big Beggarman, which was far from unfamiliar to his ears, had been mentioned by Carrotty Poll: but his features indicated a still more profound trouble at the words of Elizabeth Marks, the Gallows' Widow.

"And what is it that you require of me?" demanded the Prince, summoning all his presence of mind to his aid: for the unpleasant nature of the position in which he now found himself, was full of peril and perplexity as well as of annoyance.

"We will explain ourselves in a few words," said the Gallows' Widow, taking upon herself the office of spokeswoman. "Stephen Price, the father of this young woman, is now in gaol, waiting his trial for piracy and murder. My man, Joe Warren, is exactly in the same difficulty—and, indeed, in the same place. The evidence will be tolerably strong against them: and besides, their previous characters will be quite enough to get them found guilty and condemned to death. But they must not die—their lives must be spared, even though upon the condition of transportation for the rest of their days. You see, Prince, we do not ask too much—we are moderate in our demands——"

"Well, well," interrupted his Royal Highness, hoping to get rid of his present petitioners by means of a promise that he never intended to fulfil,—"your wishes shall be complied with—and I pledge myself to procure a commutation of those men's sentences, whenever the trial may take place."

"We are much indebted to you, Prince," said the Gallows' Widow.

"And we'll do you a good turn some day or another," added the Kinchin Grand.

"Well—now our business is ended, worthy people," exclaimed his Royal Highness; "and you can take your departure as quickly as you came. Upon my promise you may rely——"

"But we would rather have it in writing, Prince," observed the Gallows' Widow, with her wonted im-

perturbability of manner;—"and we should like the document sealed with that signet-ring which your Royal Highness wears upon your right hand," she added, pointing to the jewel itself.

"What! you will not take my word—my solemnly pledged promise?" cried the Prince. "Then be off—depart—I defy you!"

"Ah! but we are not to be defied, most illustrious Highness!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand. "Page's servant-gal is my blowen—and 'tis she who has put us up to the whole business about that young lady there," he added, looking towards Pauline, who still remained buried in a profound lethargy.

"That is true, Prince," said the Gallows' Widow, speaking without any excitement in her manner, and yet with a certain ominous significancy in her tone. "The entire proceeding is known to us in all its details;—and I ask you, Prince, what the world would say if we were to raise an alarm and bring a mob to see how his Royal Highness employs people to administer narcotic drugs to innocent young ladies, in order that he may have an opportunity of ravishing and deflowering them."

The royal voluptuary was staggered—and a mortal pallor overspread his countenance: for he saw that he was entirely in the power of a set of desperate characters. Resistance was vain—refusal was useless; and exposure was to be averted at any sacrifice. He could not make his position much worse by giving the required promise in writing: it would be a more prudent alternative than that of leaving the wretches then present to have recourse to any extreme measures which they might choose to adopt. For were his conduct towards Pauline Clarendon made public, he would be irrecoverably disgraced in the national estimation, if not altogether ruined in his prospects as heir to the throne. The situation was grave and serious; — and he inwardly cursed his folly in allowing his brutal passions to

hurry him into such a dilemma. But regrets were now useless;—and he must make the best retreat he possibly could from a most ignominious and perilous difficulty.

"You require a written pledge to the effect that I will interest myself on behalf of those men whom you have named?" he said, after a few moments' hurried communing with himself.

"That is what we require," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"Hold your tongue, Bill," cried Carrotty Poll, in her sharp vixenish tones; "and let Lizzy Marks conduct the business."

"We not only require such a pledge as your Royal Highness has mentioned," said the Gallows' Widow; "but likewise a positive undertaking that its object shall be carried into effect. In plain terms, we demand and stipulate that you shall guarantee us the lives of Stephen Price and Joseph Warren. More we cannot ask for. We do not insist upon free pardons: those, we are well aware, you could not procure, all Prince though you are. But we feel assured that you *can* obtain a commutation of the death-sentences which are certain to be passed——"

"And we will agree that my father and Joe Warren shall be transported for life," added Carrotty Poll, seeing that the Gallows' Widow hesitated for a moment. "But we won't let them be hanged."

"Egad! you are usurping powers which I cannot pretend to possess myself," exclaimed the Prince. "But I will give you the written undertaking, notwithstanding——"

"Sealed by your signet-ring," remarked the Gallows' Widow. "Otherwise you may deny your handwriting to-morrow morning."

"And here are pens and paper all ready," said Carrotty Poll. "We brought them with us to prevent any delay from taking place. There is an inkstand upon the mantel."

"Affairs of this kind are multiplying thick upon me," thought the Prince within himself, as he remembered the agreement which he had been compelled to sign in favour of Tim Meagles a few days previously: but anxious to put an immediate end to the present scene, and fearing lest Pauline should be awakened and thus escape his libidinous intent, the royal voluptuary sate down at the table and hastily drew up in writing the promise that was demanded at his hands.

While he was thus engaged, Carrotty Poll whispered to the Gallows' Widow, "What shall we do when he has finished the document? Are we to leave Miss Clarendon in his power?"

"Can you think of such a thing for a moment?" asked Lizzy, in the same subdued tone as that in which the Big Beggarman's daughter spoke. "Has not Lord Florimel behaved in the handsomest manner towards us?—did he not give us five hundred pounds on account for the services we were to perform?—and will he not reward us with a proportionate liberality when we tell him how we rescued Miss Pauline from the embraces of that wretched voluptuary? His lordship is out of town now: but he will doubtless return shortly——"

"I am sure I don't want to help the Prince in any of his tricks," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "He is one of the people's worst oppressors—and I hate him on that account. Besides, as you say, it is more to our interest to keep right with Lord Florimel."

"And in addition to all that," interposed the Kinchin-Grand, who listened attentively to the whispered dialogue of his female accomplices, "you know that Shickster Sal pleaded on behalf of that Miss Clarendon, who, she says, is a nice young lady and oughtn't to be harmed. Sal has taken quite a fancy to Miss Clarendon; and we musn't do anything that will displease the Shickster after she's behaved so well in all this here business."

"Then we'll just put a stopper on the Prince's proceedings," said Carrotty Poll, "the moment we've got the document safe in our possession. And then we'll deal with those cursed Pages——"

"And take an instalment of our vengeance," added the Gallows' Widow, with an ominous look—as much as to imply that a far deeper retaliation than any which they this night sought, would be vented in the long run against the ex-bagman and his wife.

"Now, I have finished this paper," suddenly exclaimed the Prince of Wales, who had several times, while engaged in writing, observed with uneasiness the low and earnest whispering that was going on amongst the three intruders.

"Let us read it," said the Gallows' Widow: and taking up the paper, which was duly signed and sealed, she perused it with deliberation, the Kinchin-Grand reading it over her shoulder on one side and Carrotty Poll doing the same on the other. "That will do," she observed, calmly folding it up and securing it in her bosom: "and now your Royal Highness can take your departure."

"Take my departure!" ejaculated the Prince, struck with dismay. "You mean that *you* are about to take your departure!"

"Indeed, I mean no such thing," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly but firmly. "Come—no more words—but be off! We are here to protect Miss Pauline Clarendon—and not to aid in her ruin."

"But this proceeding on your part," urged the Prince, "is not calculated to ensure my countenance and support."

"Perhaps not," returned Lizzy Marks, laconically. "But this paper will do so," she added, laying her hand upon her bosom.

"Can nothing move you?" demanded the Prince, in a tone of the bitterest vexation. "Money—any amount you require—a hundred guineas——"

"A hundred fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll, in an acrid tone of contempt. "For every guinea you can offer us to betray Miss Clarendon, we shall receive two for protecting her. So one word is as good as forty; and if your Royal Highness was to stand there arguing with us for an hour, it would be no use."

"Not a ha'porth," added the Kinchin-Grand, by way of clenching the argument.

"Then I shall not condescend to argue the point any farther," said the heir-apparent, trembling with a rage to which he dared not give vent.

And stalking forth from the chamber where his anticipated triumph had been so signally changed into the bitterest disappointment, he hastily descended the stairs—put on his hat and cloak in the hall—and quitted the house, smarting under a sense of the most painful humiliation, and cursing his unlucky stars which appeared to be so completely in the ascendant.

CHAPTER CXCVI.

CONCLUSION OF THE SCENES AT MR. PAGE'S ABODE.

The moment the Prince had taken his departure, the Gallows' Widow approached the bed and shook Pauline gently by the shoulder. The slumbering maiden was only partially aroused; and, turning round upon the other side, she sank back again into a deep lethargy. The Gallows' Widow then proceeded to bathe her forehead with water; and Pauline began to revive slowly.

As consciousness returned, she opened her eyes and gazed vacantly upon the countenances of the three forms that stood by the couch. Then a vague terror seized upon her—and a faint scream escaped her lips, as her features displayed all the signs of that alarm which had taken possession of her soul. But the Gallows' Widow hastened to breathe reassuring words in her ears.

"Do not be frightened, young lady," she said: "we are friendly disposed towards you—and the proof is that we have just delivered you from a terrible danger of which you have been wholly unconscious."

"A danger?" murmured Pauline: then, pressing her hand to her throbbing temples, she strove to collect her scattered ideas and arrange her confused reminiscences. "Ah! I recollect," she suddenly cried, raising herself to a sitting posture in the bed: then, flinging a hasty and agitated look around, she said, "Where am I?"

"In a chamber at Page's house," returned the Gallows' Widow. "You have been the object of a foul conspiracy—and nothing could have saved you from falling its victim also, if we had not come to your rescue. The wine you drank at supper was drugged—and you were sold to the Prince of Wales!"

"My God!" ejaculated Pauline, with a cry of terror.

"It is as true as that you have escaped his clutches," continued the Gallows' Widow. "Now, compose yourself, young lady," she added, perceiving that the maiden was trembling all over and that she still contemplated the countenances of the three intruders with a vague suspicion. "We were appointed by Lord Florimel to watch over and protect you—and we have done our duty."

"Lord Florimel!" exclaimed Pauline, a sudden glow of pleasure animating her features and bringing back the vital colouring to her cheeks that an instant before were pale as alabaster. "Is it possible? Oh! if it were——"

And she stopped suddenly short, as the idea that she was still beloved by the young nobleman and that she had perhaps treated him with harshness, awoke feelings of mingled tenderness and remorse in the depths of her soul.

"It is possible—and it is true, young lady," said the Gallows' Widow. "Lord Florimel loves you devotedly, and is cut to the quick because he declares that you have taken offence towards him without any real or just cause. He says that a fancied misconduct on his part has led to the bad opinion you formed of him: but he does not love you the less on that account. Very far from it: and, fearful that you would become the object of conspiracy and persecution in other quarters, he appointed us to discover where you lived and watch over you during his temporary absence in the country."

"Poor Gabriel!" murmured Pauline, the tears trickling down her cheeks—for she was profoundly moved by the communications thus unexpectedly made. "But who are you, my friends?—and to whom am I under such deep obligations?" she inquired, as she descended from the couch and seated herself in a chair by the side—for she still felt the oppressive influence of the narcotic she had imbibed.

"No matter who we are, young lady," responded the Gallows' Widow. "Our appearance may not be to your liking," she added, speaking rather with reference to the Kinchin-Grand and Carrotty Poll than to herself: "but we are staunch and true to Lord Florimel and yourself, at all events."

"Yes," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand; "and what is more, the locking up of your sister was only a piece in the conspiracy against you. It was a dodge to get her out of the way, and prevent her from blabbing about the treatment she has received from the Prince. Ah! you see that we know all about it, Miss!" he cried, observing the look of astonishment that Pauline fixed upon him: "and so you can go to the mad-house and compel the rascals to let your sister out again; or else you can apply to the beak—the magistrate, I mean—and he'll deuced soon give you justice."

"Ah! now you have filled me with hope and joyfulness!" exclaimed Pauline, clasping her hands fervently. "But how can I reward you, my friends? I do not possess much money——"

"We won't take anything from you, young lady," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, her whole policy in the representations she had made to Pauline—the light in which she explained the circumstances of the maiden's deliverance—and her refusal to accept any recompense, all being based upon the certainty of receiving a handsome acknowledgment from Lord Florimel. "You will only annoy us," continued the Gallows' Widow, "if you persist in speaking of reward."

"Then I shall not do so any more," said Pauline. "But did Lord Florimel make you acquainted with the circumstances relative to my sister?" she asked, somewhat shocked and more astonished at the idea of her lover having been guilty of such indiscretion, even with a good motive in view.

"He never opened his lips upon that head, young lady," responded Lizzy Marks: "but Mr. Page's servant-girl is a spy of ours, whom we got introduced into his service that she might keep a better watch over your safety, living as you do next door."

"And Lord Florimel is in the country, you say?" observed Pauline, interrogatively. "Do you know whither he has gone?—that I may write and thank him for his kindness," she added, a blush suffusing itself over her beauteous cheeks and pouring a flood of tender lustre into her swimming eyes—her heart all the time beating rapidly and joyously at the thought that the path to reconciliation with her lover was now so completely open.

"His lordship is at Dover," returned the Gallows' Widow. "I have called two or three times within the last month at his house in Piccadilly:

because I wanted to tell him that we had discovered your residence. But he is detained, I was told on each occasion, by particular business at Dover."

"And did you not write to him?" demanded Pauline, her tone now assuming an accent of reproach.

"That is not our way of doing business, young lady," replied the Gallows' Widow. "We never commit anything to paper, unless it's absolutely necessary: and as we have been in hopes that Lord Florimel would return to town, we thought it most prudent to await his arrival. It will now be for you, Miss, to write to him at Dover."

"And is it possible," exclaimed Pauline, another thought now coming uppermost in her mind, "that Mr. and Mrs. Page, who have affected such sincere friendship and deep commiseration towards me, are the vilest and most perfidious of traitors?"

"They are indeed, Miss Clarendon," cried Carrotty Poll. "Page is nothing more than a rascally schemer—and his wife was lately a common prostitute at the East End of London."

"Great heaven!" ejaculated Pauline, shocked by this disclosure. "And I have been the companion of that woman!"

"But you did not know her, Miss," said the Gallows' Widow: "and so you can't blame yourself."

"Oh! but what will Lord Florimel think?—what will he say?" cried Pauline, recoiling more and more from the thought of the pollution with which she had been brought in contact.

"His lordship need never know who or what Mrs. Page is," observed Carrotty Poll, "unless you choose to tell him."

"I should not think of acting with any disguise or duplicity towards him," said the young maiden, firmly. "But all this does not regard you, my friends," she immediately added. "And now that I feel sufficiently recovered to quit this house of infamy and danger, I shall take my leave of you—but not without renewed thanks for your intervention in my behalf."

And the generous Pauline extended her fair hand to the Gallows' Widow, and then offered the same testimonial of her gratitude to the Kinchin-Grand and the Big Beggarman's daughter. They accompanied her down stairs; and she regained her own dwelling in safety.

The two women and the Kinchin-Grand now knocked at the door of the parlour on the ground-floor of Page's house; and they were instantaneously admitted by Shickster Sal, who held a pistol in her hand. The ex-bagman was seated moodily enough in one corner of the room, and his wife in another—their servant-girl having mounted guard over them while the preceding scenes were taking place up-stairs. On the entrance of the three intruders, all of whom were known but too well to the ex-bagman, he gave a sudden start and flung looks of mingled terror and entreaty from one to the other: but Julia appeared to remain unmoved by their presence.

"Now, old feller," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, as he placed himself with his back against the door and received the pistol from the hands of his paramour,—"we have got you at last."

"But you will not murder me?" said Page, rising from his seat and then sinking back again into it; for his limbs trembled as if he had been suddenly seized with an ague.

"Well, all that depends upon the way you behave yourself," responded the Kinchin-Grand. "Not that I suppose you'll drive us to extremes——"

"Then, what do you demand of me?" inquired Page, his voice as tremulous as his limbs, and a hideous alarm depicted in every lineament of his countenance.

"Listen," said the Gallows' Widow, fixing her eyes with a cold and reptile-like look upon the miserable man. "You have been our deadly enemy—and all the misfortunes which have overtaken Stephen Price and Joe Warren may be attributed to your persecution of them, and the treachery of your wife. But we were resolved to revenge ourselves: and we decided upon adopting these means to get you into our power. Your servant is our agent;—and all your proceedings are known to us. The Prince has likewise got into our clutches; and we intend to keep a firm hold upon him. Miss Pauline Clarendon has been rescued from his designs; and she will to-morrow demand and procure the release of her sister. Thus, a portion of our revenge has been to defeat all *your* schemes and treacheries. We now come to the second act in the tragedy—for a tragedy it *shall* prove in the long run," she added, with a sudden lighting-up of her usually impassible features, as she darted a glance of tigress-like ferocity towards Julia.

"A tragedy?" groaned the unhappy Mr. Page, cowering as it were beneath the dreadful menace—while his wife now began to show symptoms of uneasiness, although she said nothing.

"Yes—a tragedy," echoed the Gallows' Widow, stirred by her vindictive feelings to a pitch of excitement that was rare indeed with her. "But we have not come to that stage in the drama yet. For the present we mean to content ourselves with all your money and all your valuables. So you would do well to produce them willingly—or we shall take them by force!"

"I have but a few guineas in my purse," murmured the wretched Mr. Page. "I don't know how much Julia may have in her pocket——"

"There!—that's all!" ejaculated his wife petulantly, as she flung a purse upon the table.

"Four quid, two bulls, a half-bull, a kye-bosh, and three tanners," said the Kinchin-Grand, as he emptied the purse into the palm of Carrotty Poll's hand, and thus elegantly and classically enumerated the four sovereigns, the two crown-pieces, the half-crown, the shilling, and the three sixpenny-pieces, which formed the contents.

"Now make him open his writing-desk," exclaimed Shickster Sal, pointing contemptuously towards her master. "But stay—I'll fetch it!"—and she hurried from the room.

In a few moments she returned, bringing with her the writing-desk, which Mr. Page was compelled to open: and while the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll were ransacking it, he looked on with the air and feelings of a man who is about to be hanged.

"Ah! there's the flimsies!" ejaculated the Kinchin-Grand, as Elizabeth Marks drew forth a bundle of bank-notes. "How many is there of them delicate-looking bits of paper?"

"More than a thousand pounds altogether," re-

plied the Gallows' Widow, after deliberately examining the notes: then, as she secured them in the bosom of her dress, she turned towards Shickster Sal, saying, "Where else are we to look?"

"You'll take the plate, of course?" observed this young female—and without waiting for a reply, she once more quitted the room.

"You see, Julia," exclaimed Mr. Page, wringing his hands, "that they are going to despoil us of everything we possess?"

"I see it all, sure enough," returned Julia, flinging a look of diabolical hatred upon the two women and the Kinchin-Grand.

"Then why don't you do something to prevent them?" cried the ex-bagman, without pausing to reflect upon what he said in his mingled rage and despair.

"Why don't *you?*" demanded Mrs. Page, now darting a glance of unmitigated contempt upon her husband. "I always thought you were a sneaking coward—and now I am convinced of it."

"Don't vex me, Julia—I can't bear it!" exclaimed Page. "I'm wretched and miserable enough as it is. But surely our kind friends here will have *some* mercy upon us?" he added, turning with an air of appeal towards his merciless spoliators.

"Kind friends indeed!" ejaculated Julia. "It is now a war to the knife between them and me," she muttered in a voice audible only to herself.

At this moment Shickster Sal returned to the parlour, with the plate wrapped up in an apron. This portion of the plunder was entrusted to the guardianship of the Kinchin-Grand; and Mr. Page groaned with a most ludicrous misery as he beheld his silver forks and spoons consigned to the depths of the young reprobate's pocket.

"Now their watches and rings," exclaimed Shickster Sal, exultingly. "Ah! I owe them a spite for many a harsh word and mean and stingy prying into the larder to see if I'd eaten too much."

"Your watch, ear-rings, and finger-ring," said the Kinchin-Grand, accosting Julia with the pistol in his hand.

Mrs. Page divested herself of her jewellery with a calmness that was ominous as the lull which precedes the outburst of the tempest's rage: but her husband fell upon his knees and implored that his personal decorations might be at least spared. His plunderers were however remorseless: and Mr. Page's jewellery followed his wife's trinkets into the custody of the Big Beggarman's daughter.

"Now, is there anything else worth taking?" inquired the Kinchin-Grand, who was hugely delighted with the work of spoliation.

"Not that I can recollect," answered Shickster Sal.

"This will do for the present," observed the Gallows' Widow. "And now," she continued, addressing herself to Mr. and Mrs. Page, "if you dare to attempt the slightest retaliation in any way, we shall unhesitatingly give information against you for drugging the wine that was to make Miss Clarendon the Prince's victim. She would in that case be compelled to come forward and bear testimony against you; and her evidence would be enough to transport you both for the rest of your days, if not hang you."

Mr. Page groaned once more, as if he already felt a halter tightening round his throat: but Julia affected the most complete indifference.

The Gallows' Widow, Carrotty Poll, the Kinchin-Grand, and Shickster Sal, now took their departure, two by the front door, and two by the back way, the better to escape observation;—and the ex-bagman remained alone with his wife, to deplore the immense loss which they had just sustained.

Early on the following morning they quitted their abode at Paradise Villas;—and in the course of the day a van arrived at the house which they had thus abruptly vacated, to remove their furniture to some other dwelling.

CHAPTER CXCVII.

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and the Earl of Desborough was seated in the library at Stamford Manor. A book lay open before him: but although his eyes remained mechanically fixed upon its pages, his thoughts were travelling away from the subject of the volume.

For he was reflecting upon the many grave and saddening incidents which had occurred in his household, alike in Berkeley Square and at Stamford Manor, within the last few months; and he felt deeply, deeply for the sorrow and the shame that had fallen upon the head of her whom he adored with so sublime a worship.

So profoundly absorbed was he in his meditations that he did not hear the door open and close again: but he was suddenly startled by feeling a hand laid gently upon his shoulder. He looked up—and he beheld his wife standing close by his chair: but he was instantaneously struck by the mingled wildness, fierce determination, and bitter hatred that were legible upon her countenance. An ominous light burnt in those eyes the glory of which was marred by the corrugation of the ebon brows: the lips, whence the rich vital colouring had almost completely fled, were closely compressed;—and her countenance wore a pallor that looked all the more ghastly in consequence of the olive tint of the complexion.

"Heavens! what—some new source of sorrow?" exclaimed the Earl, starting from his seat and gazing with an intense anxiety upon his wife.

"Say rather, some new reason for a prompt and summary vengeance!" replied Eleanor, in a low thick voice: and she gave utterance with difficulty to these words which appeared to choke her.

"Tell me what has happened—do not keep me in suspense!" cried the Earl, tortured with the cruellest apprehensions.

"That villain demands another interview with me," answered the Countess, her eyes flashing brighter fires than the brightest eyes of woman had ever before shot forth, and her whole form quivering with terrible feelings.

"The miscreant!" ejaculated the Earl, clenching his fingers with such spasmodic violence that the nails made deep indentations in the palms of his hands. "But by what means has he conveyed this request?"

"Request!" echoed the Countess, with an indescribable bitterness: "'tis a command—an imperious command! The villain has had the audacity

to send me a letter, declaring that he insists upon seeing me this evening at nine o'clock——"

"Ah! dares the Prince make another attempt?" cried the Earl, his own countenance becoming pale with rage and his lips growing ashy and quivering.

"No, no—'tis not for *that!*" exclaimed Eleanor. "The man whose name I cannot mention, has received his pardon through the intervention of the Prince; and he therefore defies *you* and persecutes *me*."

"But why does he demand this interview?" cried the Earl. "Does he not know enough of you to be convinced that you would prefer death, rather than yield again——"

"O God! do not allude to my past frailty, Francis!" exclaimed the Countess wildly. "You will drive me mad! But pardon this excitement," she immediately added, in a gentler tone, as she took her husband's hand and pressed it to her lips. "No—the villain does not desecrate the name of love by addressing me in such terms or with such a hope. But he demands money—and he orders me—yes, *orders* me—to meet him this night at nine o'clock with five thousand pounds, as the only condition on which he swears to leave me unmolested for the future."

"The sum is nothing, Eleanor," said the nobleman in a musing tone: "but the man's oath——"

"Is valueless," added the unfortunate lady, with a bitter emphasis. "Besides, the excitement is killing me! I cannot live in the constant terror of receiving some new proof of this man's fiendish villany or heartless extortion. The dread of his persecution would poison all the little happiness that remains to me in this life: my thoughts by day and my dreams by night would be filled with images of horror conjured up by the knowledge that there existed in the world *one* individual who could blast my reputation in a moment. Such an existence would be a perpetual torture—a prolonged excruciation — an endless series of maddening agonies. No—no: I cannot endure it, Francis;—and either——"

"Speak, Eleanor," said the Earl, trembling with apprehension beneath the look of awful gloom and sombre determination which settled itself upon his wife's countenance as she suddenly stopped short in her observations. "You were saying that either——"

"Either that man or myself must die!" answered the Countess, in a deep voice: and there was a ferocious glare in her eyes, which showed how terrible were the thoughts that the cruellest combination of circumstances had excited in the mind of a woman naturally so generous-hearted and so magnanimous.

"Holy God! what mean you, Eleanor?" demanded the Earl, grasping her wrist with convulsive violence and gazing with horrified looks into the depths of those eyes wherein an ominous light was burning.

"I mean," she answered, with the measured accents of despair, "that you must now choose between two appalling alternatives! I mean," she continued, with the emphasis of stern resolution, "that you have now to make up your mind whether you shall follow to the grave the corpse of a suicide wife—or whether that wife shall live, but with the brand of a murderess upon her brow!"

"Just heaven! has it come to this, Eleanor?" exclaimed the nobleman, trembling from head to foot, as if struck with a palsy.

"I have told you the alternatives," she replied, with the awful coldness of despair. "That villain and myself cannot continue to breathe the same air. So long as he encumbers this world with his presence, he may cross my path at any moment;—and I repeat that I could not live in the constant excitement of such an apprehension. No—either he or I must perish! A crime will have to be committed by *my* hand: and it is for *you* to decide whether that crime shall be suicide or murder. To me it is a matter of indifference: for I have resolved to escape either from *his* persecution or else from life!"

"Oh! you distress me beyond all measure, my worshipped—my adored—my well-beloved Eleanor!" exclaimed the unhappy Earl, sinking down upon his knees at her feet, and moistening her hands with his tears as he pressed them with frenzied violence to his lips. "For God's sake, my darling Eleanor, re-consider this dreadful affair! Remember, that if you decide upon ridding your path of that enemy, no subsequent remorse can recall the deed—no after-compunction undo the act! Besides, my love—my angel—my afflicted one, it must not be *you* who will do this—but I—your husband: and will you make me a murderer?"

"No—not for worlds, Francis!" exclaimed the wretched lady, compelling him to rise from his suppliant posture and then throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh! you will re-consider the matter, my beloved?" he cried, straining her to his breast and covering her countenance with kisses and with tears.

"Alas! there is nothing to re-consider—my mind is made up!" she said, gently disengaging herself from her husband's embrace. "But I will not permit you to perpetrate a crime, Francis—you who have never committed a foul deed in all your life!"

"Yes—when I led you as a victim to the altar," said the Earl, in a low deep tone of indescribable self-reproach.

"Ah! we will not talk of *that* now, my husband!" exclaimed the Countess. "You must consent to yield to those imperious circumstances which have environed me as with a wall of adamant,—circumstances which are rapidly closing in around me, and which will crush me to death unless I clear myself a means of egress by one desperate and decisive blow. Listen to what Ramsey stipulates—or rather, what he commands! He tells me that to-night at nine o'clock I am to meet him in the open field behind the shrubbery—that I am to bring with me the sum of five thousand pounds in notes, gold, or other monies equally available—that I must proceed *alone* to the place of appointment—and that if I refuse to yield to these conditions, he will publish the history of his amour with me,—yes, publish everything, and thereby gain by the sale of so extraordinary a narrative a sum equal to, if not larger than, that amount which he has demanded as the price of his secrecy!"

"He has dared to write all this?" exclaimed the Earl, still trembling with rage and terror.

"Nay—read for yourself!" cried the Countess: and drawing forth a letter from her bosom, she

gave it to Lord Desborough, who hurriedly perused the contents. "Now are you satisfied, Francis?" she asked: and taking back the note, she deliberately lighted a taper and burnt it.

"I did not doubt your word, Eleanor," said the Earl: "but I was astonished at the villany—the matchless villany—of this wretch who seeks to turn into a source of gain and profit the immeasurable injury which he has inflicted upon you. Oh! my dear wife, this is an affair which must be left to me—this is a matter which I alone can settle! And depend upon it that the reckoning shall be terrible——"

"Once more, Francis—and let it be for the last time—I tell you that the affair is *mine*, and I alone can settle it!" interrupted the Countess, her voice, her manner, and her looks, all denoting an irrevocable decision. "Decide then, my dear husband—decide: which shall my doom be—that of a self-destroyer or of an assassin?"

"Great God! we must not have recourse to such shocking expedients!" exclaimed the nobleman, shuddering to the innermost recesses of his being. "Let us yield to the wretch's extortion—let us comply with his demands—and let us live on in the hope that his persecution of *you* has indeed ended. But should he again seek to molest you, Eleanor, then—oh! then, I will urge not a syllable against any course which you may decide upon adopting."

"No reliance is to be placed upon that man," said the Countess, in a voice which showed that her resolution was unalterable. "The same diabolical spirit which urges him to practise extortions now, will only be sharpened and not appeased, strengthened and not satiated, by our concession. If we yield to-day, we may expect further demonstrations of his power to-morrow: if we show ourselves weak and timorous, he will become proportionately bold and merciless in his demands. No—we must put an end to this state of things, which I at least can endure no longer. There was a time—but a short while ago—when I should have shrunk in dismay from the thought of suicide, and in horror from that of murder. But now, so desperate have grown the circumstances of my position, I can contemplate them both with calmness. Do not you, therefore, discourage me, my husband: but rather inspire me with firmness, if any be wanting on my part, to perform one of those deeds either of which has become a duty. Yes—and whatever be your decision, you will screen me! If your judgment be self-destruction for me—if you would rather lose your wife altogether, than let her live as a murderess—you will not allow the world to know that I took poison. But if, on the other hand, you decide that I shall live——"

"My God! my God! you are driving me mad, Eleanor!" exclaimed the wretched nobleman, as he pressed his hand forcibly to his throbbing brows and leant against the mantel-piece for support. "Do not talk thus dreadfully—do not abandon yourself to the fearful thoughts which are whirling you along with their eddies."

"Oh! you must be calm—you must be calm, Francis!" cried the lady, taking his hand and pressing it to her bosom. "Those wild and passionate ejaculations on your part—those entreaties so unavailing in the face of my unalterable resolve—those earnest prayers and anguished cries, only add bitterness to a scene which is already a crucifixion of us both! Come—be bold—be firm—be courageous, my dear husband; and prepare to give that decision which now alone is wanting to direct me in one path or the other."

"And are you thus determined, Eleanor?" asked the unhappy nobleman, scarcely able to believe in the frightful truth which was now present to his contemplation.

"I take heaven to witness that my resolve is unalterable—my mind unchangeable!" answered the Countess, in a solemn tone. "There—feel my hand: does it tremble? No. And my heart palpitates with violence no longer. I am calm—I am tranquil—I am even happy in the certitude of being released, by one means or another, from an intolerable tyranny. And remember, my dear husband, that if you doom me by your decision to suicide, you will yet remain alive to endure that persecution whence I shall have escaped by the avenue of self-destruction."

"No—no—my Eleanor—my loved one," exclaimed the Earl of Desborough, whose feelings were harrowed to a frightful degree of poignancy,—"you shall not die! What, you—so young—so beautiful—so full of all the freshness of youth and the vigour of health,—*you* to die so soon—*you* to perish thus early—and by thine own hand,——Oh! no—it must not be! You shall live, my worshipped Eleanor—live to triumph over this enemy of thine; —and since I see that thou art resolute, Eleanor, I will take courage from thy determination—I will acquire firmness from thy equanimity. Live, then, my Eleanor:—live!" repeated the Earl, with a sort of enthusiastic devotion to the very crime which had horrified him a few instants before: "live, I say—and let thine enemy—thy fierce, merciless, diabolical enemy perish as he deserves!"

"Oh! now thou art deserving of all my love!" exclaimed the Countess, throwing herself into the arms of her husband.

CHAPTER CXCVIII.

THE LAST MEETING.

Since his return to England Tim Meagles had removed his horses from Lady Lade's stables to the mews where he had always been wont to keep them prior to his temporary expatriation: for the Amazon, faithful to her determination of leading a prudential life during the period of her mourning, was unwilling that any circumstance should seem to indicate the renewal of a too familiar connexion with Meagles. Hence the removal of his stud back to the mews where he had been wont to contract for their keep.

The proprietor of that stabling establishment was in the habit of letting out post-chaises and vehicles of all kinds;—and it happened that about three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day on which the scene in the preceding chapter occurred at Stamford Manor, a gentleman entered the mews and ordered a post-chaise to be got ready to take him to Aylesbury.

Now, at this particular moment Tim Meagles was in the stable where his own horses were kept; and he overheard the instructions just given by the gentleman. The voice instantaneously struck him as being that of Philip Ramsey; and the sus-

picion appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that the individual was about to visit the neighbourhood of Stamford Manor. Ascending to a loft which had a window overlooking the stable-yard, Meagles was enabled to obtain a view of the person whose proceedings had thus suddenly interested him; and he found, as he had suspected, that it was none other than the resuscitated criminal.

"Ah! the Prince is doubtless at his tricks again," thought Meagles within himself: "or else this fellow is intent upon persecuting the poor Countess in order to serve some private aim of his own. In either case it behoves me to watch his movements. If he is still employed by the Prince, it will afford me the greatest pleasure to thwart his plans; and if he is acting on his own account, I am in a measure bound by the Earl's generosity towards me, to detect and expose the covert treachery. No, no, Mr. Ramsey!—you shan't carry on this odious game any longer, if I can put a stop to it. I suppose you have got your pardon safe in your pocket;—or else you would not venture abroad in this undisguised manner during the broad daylight. But, by Jove! 'tis almost a pity that you weren't suffered to go back to the gallows, which has assuredly been cheated of a most fit and proper subject for its operations. However, I will put a spoke in your wheel ere long, if you do mean to persecute that unfortunate lady and her noble husband."

Thus musing, Tim Meagles watched from the window of the loft until the post-chaise was got ready. Ramsey stepped into it: the postilion received his instructions;—and the vehicle then rolled out of the stable-yard.

Descending from the loft, Tim ordered his horse to be saddled immediately; and mounting the noble animal, he set off in pursuit of the post-chaise. About a mile beyond the suburbs he came within sight of it; and he continued to follow it at such a distance that he stood no chance of being observed by Ramsey, should this individual look forth from the windows of the vehicle.

Aylesbury is forty miles from London; and as the weather was remarkably fine on the day of which we are writing, the roads were good. The chaise accordingly travelled at the rate of about ten miles an hour:—and it was a little after seven in the evening when it arrived in the close vicinage of Aylesbury. But Ramsey had no inclination to enter a town where he was so well known,—although, as Meagles surmised, he *had* his pardon in his pocket. He accordingly directed the postilion to turn into a bye-road leading in the direction of Stamford Manor; and the chaise ultimately stopped at the very same way-side public-house where Meagles had put up on the memorable night of his intervention on behalf of the Countess of Desborough.

That Philip Ramsey's designs bore reference to the inmates of the Manor, Tim Meagles was now convinced—even if he had previously entertained any doubt upon the subject;—and his first impulse was to repair straight to that mansion, and warn the Earl of Desborough of the presence of the enemy. But a second thought showed him the imprudence of losing sight of an individual of whose aims and purposes he was still so far ignorant as to render it desirable that he should dog him step by step: and Meagles accordingly resolved to continue watching the movements of the resuscitated criminal. Fortunately for his purpose, a lad connected with the public-house passed along the road while Meagles was thus deliberating within himself;—and the liberality with which Tim had remunerated the dependants of the little inn on the former occasion of his visit to the neighbourhood, had made a sufficient impression upon the boy's mind to lead him now to the immediate recognition of so bounteous a patron. He accordingly touched his cap by way of salutation, and inquired whether Meagles was going to stop at the inn.

"Yes," answered Tim. "But I have come down here on business of a very private nature; and I want to speak to the landlord before I approach any nearer to his house, as he has got a very suspicious character there. Now, my lad, do you go on as quick as you can; and without saying anything to alarm the inmates of the place, tell the landlord to come to me directly. I shall wait here in the lane."

With these words, Meagles tossed a crown-piece to the lad, who hastened away to execute the commission entrusted to him. In about ten minutes the landlord made his appearance, with a somewhat elongated countenance: for the message which the lad had whispered in his ear was not of a very reassuring character.

"My good fellow," said Meagles, leaping from his horse, "you need not be alarmed—as I am here on purpose to prevent mischief. In fact, I am a Bow Street officer in disguise; and I am watching the individual who has just alighted from a post-chaise at your house."

"What! is such a respectable-looking gentleman a bad character in reality?" inquired the landlord.

"He is indeed," returned Meagles. "Did you never see him before?"

"Never, to my knowledge," was the reply. "Who is he, sir?"

"That does not matter now," rejoined Tim. "You may perhaps learn by and bye. But what is he doing now?"

"He engaged the private parlour and ordered some dinner to be got ready as soon as possible," said the landlord.

"And is he in the parlour now?" demanded Meagles.

"Yes, sir. He inquired if we'd got anything to read; and I sent him in some old books. I suppose that if he's a house-breaker or what not, he'll remain snug in-doors until night-time?"

"That will be his game precisely," answered Tim. "And now you must lead my horse to the stable, while I get round by the back way into the house; and there you must let me have a room which will enable me to keep a strict watch upon the movements of the rascal. But mind and do not breathe a word that will create any alarm in the place or lead the fellow to suspect that he is being dogged."

"I understand you, sir," replied the landlord. "If you go round by the field, you can enter the house without being obliged to pass the windows of the room where the vagabond is sitting: and I shall be ready to lead you to a chamber adjoining the parlour."

These arrangements were accordingly carried into effect;—and a good dinner was served up to Meagles, who was prepared to do ample justice to it after his long ride.

At about a quarter to nine o'clock, the landlord stole softly into the chamber to inform Meagles that the suspicious customer had ordered the horses to be put to the chaise at ten o'clock, and that he had stated his intention to step across to Stamford Manor in the interval. Accordingly, the landlord watched until Ramsey sallied forth, which he did in a few minutes;—and Meagles lost no time in following him.

It was a beautiful moon-lit evening: but the road was bordered by a high hedge on one side; and, favoured by the deep shade thereof, Meagles was enabled to pursue the criminal without being perceived. Stamford Manor was in the immediate neighbourhood: but instead of entering the enclosure for the purpose of seeking the front-door, Ramsey struck into a narrow lane leading to the fields behind the garden and shrubbery. Thither did Meagles follow him, still contriving to escape observation;—and when the resuscitated criminal entered the meadow where he had desired Lady Desborough to meet him, the wary Tim concealed himself behind a large tree. For by the way in which Ramsey paused and looked anxiously around, Meagles judged that he had an appointment with some one in that particular place.

Nor was our astute friend mistaken: for in a few minutes a lady, enveloped in a cloak, issued from the shrubbery and advanced towards the spot where Philip Ramsey had posted himself. By the stature and gait of the lady, Meagles had little difficulty in at once recognising the Countess of Desborough;—but if he had entertained any uncertainty upon that score, the doubt was speedily

dissolved when the rays of the moon streamed full upon her countenance as she cast a rapid and searching look around.

Ramsey suffered her to advance almost as far as the spot where he was standing, ere he moved a step forward to encounter her: his aim was evidently to assure himself that she had come *alone*. Accordingly, when he found that no person was following her at a distance, and when his listening ear caught the sound of no footstep besides her own gentle tread upon the dewy sward, he advanced a few paces to meet her. Then, by the light of the silver moon that was filling the atmosphere with so sweet and pure a lustre, did the looks of that vile man encounter those of that desperate woman;—and each recoiled from the other with a simultaneous shuddering, because the man felt that he was playing the part of a despicable coward, and to the woman it already seemed as if the murder-mark of blood were upon her brow!

"Let our interview be short and the business speedily concluded," said Ramsey, with the abruptness of one who can find no apologetic preface wherewith to open the conversation.

"I shall not detain you many minutes, sir," replied the Countess, in a cold and measured voice, although the palpitations of her heart were nervously quick and short. "But before I yield to the extortionate demand which you have made upon me——"

"Ah! then you mean to comply with my request—and you will act wisely!" interrupted Ramsey: then, as his looks quailed beneath the flashing eyes of the noble lady whose countenance was ghastly pale, he said, "I know—I feel that I am playing a villanous part; but I have resolved to make war upon the world and spare no one. To a man placed in such fearful circumstances as those which belong to my history, there is but one source of comfort and solace—and that is money! By the aid of gold I may surround myself with all the luxuries, the elegancies, and the enjoyments of life, and thereby form a barrier against the too frequent intrusion of overwhelming reminiscences. Gold, then, is now the deity of my adoration—the idol of my worship. Wherever I can obtain it by fair means or by foul, I will joyously welcome its presence. And not from you alone, Countess of Desborough, shall I extort the glittering ore: but even upon higher personages still must the tribute be levied. Yes—I hold the means of enforcing all this——"

"And you have chosen to commence with me?" exclaimed Eleanor, cutting short that long tirade which the wretch was delivering in a vein of malignant triumph. "Well, be it so!" she added, resuming that cold and measured tone which afforded not the slightest clue to the real nature of the thoughts that were agitating in her bosom. "The amount you have demanded of me shall be placed at your disposal. But before we separate, I must so far relieve the intolerable bitterness of those feelings which I entertain towards you by proclaiming, Philip Ramsey, that madly—profoundly—devotedly as I once loved you, so fiercely and intensely do I now hate you!"

And the words came hissing snake-like from between the lips that were ashy and quivering—and the splendid eyes of the Countess darted forth fires at the same moment.

"Enough of this!" cried Ramsey, in an insolent tone of authority. "I came not hither to be taunted nor reviled: beware, lady, how I may become the reviler!"

"Ah! I see that it is time to put an end to our interview!" ejaculated the Countess, her right arm moving beneath the cloak which wrapped her form.

"Give me the money, and let me take my departure," said the criminal, greedily anxious to clutch the fruits of his extortion.

"I have brought it in a bag—gold and bank-notes all mixed together," continued Eleanor: "but by the light of the moon you can assure yourself that the sum is correct."

"I will take your word for it," rejoined Ramsey, extending his hand to receive the hoped-for treasure. "Give me the bag!"

"The reward of your vile treachery towards me?" exclaimed the Countess, in a tone of bitter inquiry.

"Term it what you will," cried Ramsey, impatiently. "Call it *reward* if you like—only give it quick——"

"Then take it!" ejaculated Eleanor, abruptly stretching forth her right arm from beneath the cloak: and the sudden movement was followed, rapidly as the eye winks, by the report of a pistol.

A short quick cry burst from Ramsey's lips—and the next instant, while that death-sound was yet piercing the air, he threw up his arms and fell down dead!

The murderess turned and fled precipitately towards the shrubbery whence she had emerged a few minutes before; and Meagles, stupified with a horrible consternation, remained transfixed to the spot where he had concealed himself behind a tree.

CHAPTER CXCIX.

AFTER THE MURDER.

SUDDENLY a wild and fearful light flamed up in the mind of Tim Meagles, showing him at a glance all the perils which, in a single moment as it were, had sprung into existence around him. He had followed Ramsey from London—he had watched him at the adjacent public-house—and he had dogged him to that field where the tragedy had just taken place. The corpse of the murdered man would be discovered; and he (Meagles) would be pointed out by an overwhelming combination of circumstantial evidence as the author of the crime!

Roused from his stupor by these harrowing reflections which traversed his brain with the vividness and speed of lightning, Meagles darted in pursuit of Lady Desborough. She was just on the point of entering the shrubbery, when the sounds of those quick steps behind, smote like a death-knell upon her ears; and she clung, panting with terror and trembling all over, to the gate of the enclosure.

"Almighty God! what have you done, miserable woman?" demanded Meagles, clutching her violently by the shoulder.

The voice was familiar to the Countess;—and turning round with a spasmodic start, she instantaneously recognised her deliverer of the other night.

"Oh! Mr. Meagles, you will not betray me?" she cried, a gleam of hope appearing upon the countenance that an instant before was convulsed with indescribable terror.

But before Meagles had time to utter a word in response to that appeal, a rustling amidst the evergreens of the shrubbery was heard, and the form of a man sprang forth.

"Ah! it is you, Francis!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, as the moonlight fell upon the features of her husband.

"Yes — I followed you, Eleanor, thus far on your path of vengeance and of daring," replied the Earl, in a voice that was thick and hoarse;—"and I remained close at hand to protect you in the event of a struggle with your enemy."

"And that enemy — he is no more!" said the Countess, in a low, deep, and solemn tone. "But you, Mr. Meagles—how came you here?" she demanded, turning abruptly towards that individual.

"My object was of a friendly nature towards you, unhappy lady," replied Tim, on whose countenance were yet depicted the traces of that horror with which the shocking deed had inspired him. "Suffice it to say that I accidentally learnt Ramsey's intention to pay this neighbourhood a visit to-night: and believing his object to bode no good to you, I followed him all the way from London and watched him hither. But would to God that I had attended to my own business instead!" he added bitterly.

"Mr. Meagles," said the Earl, taking Tim's hand and pressing it forcibly, "you must not betray this frightful secret! That villain has only met his righteous doom. Alas! you are not ignorant of the fatal power which he exercised over my unhappy wife—you are acquainted with the tremendous secret of that influence! Know, then, in addition, that the miscreant's last act of despotism was the endeavour to extort a large sum of money as the price of his silence: and my wife, unable to endure that continued persecution——"

"God knows that there is extenuation enough for this crime!" ejaculated Meagles. "But terrible dangers now environ me!" — and he hastily explained the nature of his position, as we have already detailed it at the opening of this chapter.

"Then what is to be done? — what would you advise?" asked the Earl, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh! do not imagine that punishment shall be allowed to overtake the innocent, Mr. Meagles!" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, with a sudden presence of mind and a moral courage that sprang from a heroic resolution to dare and suffer all the consequences of her crime. "I have not been bold only to perpetrate the deed: but I will continue bold to avow it!"

"No—never, never!" groaned the unhappy Earl, wringing his hands despairingly.

"And I say *never, never* also!" exclaimed Meagles, who, in spite of his horror at the deed which she had just committed, could not help admiring the Countess for her resolution to screen the innocent and suffer all the consequences of her turpitude. "We must remove every trace of the fearful tragedy," he added; "and leave the rest to chance. Does your lordship feel equal to the task of assisting me to bury that corpse?"—and his voice sank to a low whisper, which seemed to mingle ominously with the rustling leaves.

"Yes—I will assist you," returned the nobleman, scarcely appearing to be aware of what he was saying or doing.

"Then your ladyship will hasten in-doors," observed Meagles, "and assure yourself that this night's proceedings have passed unnoticed and unsuspected."

"Let the Earl go home," said the Countess: "I will remain here and assist you in concealing the traces of my own work."

"No, no!" ejaculated Meagles, impatiently. "Your absence will be remarked—whereas that of the Earl will excite no particular attention. Do as I say, madam—or I wash my hands of the business."

"You shall be obeyed, Mr. Meagles," said the Countess: then, grasping his hand and straining it with force, she whispered, "My honour—my safety—my life, are now in your keeping——"

"And they are safe with me!" was the solemn and impressive rejoinder.

As the moonbeams fell fully on the partially upturned countenance of Lady Desborough, Meagles saw that she fixed upon him a look of intense gratitude;—and he experienced a cruel shock and a poignant pang at the thought that so splendid a creature had perpetrated such a crime!

"Now, my lord," he hastened to exclaim, as he turned towards the Earl, "you must lose no time in procuring a spade, while I will undertake to drag the corpse from the spot where it is now lying to this shrubbery—and *there* will we bury it."

The Countess took her husband's arm and led him rapidly away towards the mansion, — while Meagles, after throwing a look of piercing scrutiny around to assure himself as far as he was able that the coast was clear, advanced towards the spot where the corpse lay.

Naturally courageous and undaunted though he were, he could not help shuddering as he approached the inanimate form that lay upon the dewy sward;—and a sickening sensation took possession of him, as his looks fell upon the pale and blood-stained countenance of the dead. For the contents of the pistol had penetrated the brain of the victim; and the forehead seemed entirely shattered.

But that feeling of mingled terror and sinking of the heart was only transitory;—and, with another searching glance thrown around the field, Tim Meagles began to drag the corpse towards the shrubbery. This portion of the task was soon accomplished; and, having opened the gate, Meagles drew the body inside the enclosure.

The Earl of Desborough had not as yet re-appeared; — and it suddenly struck Meagles that there might be some papers or letters of consequence about the person of the murdered man. He accordingly stooped down and examined his pockets. A packet of documents, tied with a piece of tape, was the fruit of this search;—and Meagles unhesitatingly took possession thereof. But neither the purse nor the watch of the deceased did he touch: had Ramsey's pocket been lined with precious stones, Meagles would have shrunk in loathing and scorn from the idea of self-appropriating a single one of such gems.

Almost immediately after he had taken posses-

sion of the packet of papers, the sounds of approaching footsteps reached his ears;—and the Earl returned, bearing a spade and mattock. The nobleman's countenance, as the moonbeams fell upon it, was ghastly pale;—and there was a vacant wildness in his looks which showed how terrible an impression the tragedy of the evening had made upon his mind.

"My lord," said Meagles, in an earnest tone, "you must summon all your courage to your aid. Remember that an incautious word, uttered in the presence of a domestic or a friend, may send your wife to the scaffold!"

"Holy God! it is but too true!" ejaculated the nobleman, as if startled by the warning into all the poignancy of harrowing convictions. "Let us hasten and perform our dreadful task!"

"Does your lordship think that we are secure against observation?" inquired Meagles. "Will none of your lordship's dependants pass in this direction — to lock the gate, or see that all is safe——"

"No—this gate is never locked," returned the Earl. "Let us lose no time in hollowing a grave for the wretch who is no more," he added, with feverish impatience.

A spot amidst the evergreens was chosen—and Meagles fell to work. The nobleman, inspired with an intense anxiety to remove all traces of the crime from *above* the earth, rendered effectual assistance;—and in somewhat less than an hour a pit was dug of a sufficient depth for the required purpose. The corpse was then placed therein—the mould was shovelled back—the superfluous soil was scattered over the ground in the vicinity—and the unblest obsequies of the murdered man were concluded.

The Earl of Desborough now seemed to breathe easily for the first time since the enactment of the fatal tragedy in which his wife played the part of heroine. He invited Meagles to enter the Manor and take some refreshment after the toils of the last hour: but Tim had an insuperable repugnance to remain longer than was necessary with the Earl—for the words which the nobleman uttered when he joined the Countess at the shrubbery gate, had clearly indicated his complicity in the deed. In plain terms Meagles saw that the Earl was an accessory before the fact;—and, great though the provocation had been, he could not regard the noble couple in any other light than a murderer and a murderess. He accordingly took a hasty leave of Lord Desborough, and retraced his steps to the public-house.

It was now past eleven o'clock—and Meagles found the landlord anxiously awaiting his return. But Tim was already prepared how to act: and, immediately on entering the tavern, he exclaimed, "Well, is that fellow come back?"

"No, sir," was the landlord's reply. "What has happened?"

"I suppose he has smelt a rat and bolted," returned Meagles. "I followed him for a considerable distance: but he evidently saw that I was watching him——"

"Ah! then I am swindled out of the dinner and the wine which he had!" interrupted the landlord, in a tone of vexation. "He will never come back—that's quite sure!"

"You may put his expenses down in my bill," said Meagles, in an off-hand manner,—"since it was I who frightened the rascal away from your house. And now give me a glass of brandy-and-water; and then show me to my bed-room—for I shall sleep here to-night."

These orders were duly complied with;—and the moment Tim Meagles was alone in the chamber to which he had been conducted, he fastened the door and sate down at the table to examine the packet of papers which he had taken from the person of the murdered man.

But how great was his joy and how indescribable his astonishment, when on the outside letter of the bundle he beheld these words:—

Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford: together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments. In the years 1757—1758.

"By Jove! this promises to be a lucky windfall for me!" said Meagles to himself, as with nervous impatience he unfastened the tape which encircled the packet: and his hands trembled so from acute suspense, that he dropped several of the papers upon the floor.

But speedily picking them up again, he addressed himself to the examination of their contents: and in a very few minutes he was involved in the study of the most thrilling, exciting, and interesting correspondence and memoranda that ever engaged his attention.

And through what varied transitions of feeling did his mind pass, as he plunged deeper and deeper into those documents! Now he was absorbed by the most touching pathos—then excited by the most frenzied words of despair: now he was enthralled by fervid appeals—then startled by the wildest ravings of grief. Such were the contents of the *letters*. But presently he found that the *Important Memoranda* were leading him on to the discovery of secrets of a stupendous character,—secrets intimately regarding the King of England,—yes, secrets which bore the closest reference to the honour, character, and position of George III!

With increasing wonder and interest, did Meagles turn to the *Explanatory Comments:* and from them he gleaned a full and complete solution of the mystery for the development of which the *Memoranda* had already prepared him.

Unable to restrain his amazement at the tremendous secret which he had thus discovered, and still less competent to bridle the joy which he felt at having become its depositary, Meagles sprang from his seat;—and the dread tragedy of the evening being as completely banished from his mind as if it had never occurred, he paced the room in a perfect transport of wild and ecstatic feelings. For the papers which he had formerly possessed, and which the Prince of Wales had obtained back again from the Amazon, were but "cakes and gingerbread," to use Sancho Panza's remark, compared with the correspondence and memoranda which had now fallen into his hands, and which so closely concerned the King of England.

In a word, Meagles gave way to all the extremes of an extravagant joy;—until, gradually cooling and growing collected, he began to recollect that it was far advanced into the night and that he proposed to rise early to return to town. He accordingly went to bed: but some time elapsed ere he could

compose himself to sleep;—and then his dreams were filled with images of murdered men—stark corpses—and deep graves, all curiously and fantastically blending with scenes in which George III—a beautiful Quakeress—an infant child—and various other persons or ideas connected with the important documents, were strangely jumbled. It was therefore a relief when he was awakened by the light of morning streaming into his chamber;—and, starting from the couch, he achieved his toilette with all possible despatch.

Breakfast being disposed of and the bill paid with liberality, Tim Meagles mounted his horse and began to retrace his way to London.

CHAPTER CC.

ANOTHER INTERVIEW WITH THE KING.

In the afternoon of the same day on which Mr. Timothy Meagles thus returned to the metropolis, the King and Queen held a grand levee and drawing-room at St. James's Palace. The farce of a parcel of titled fools and vain or silly women decking themselves out in all their splendour for the purpose of attending the royal raree-show, was duly performed;—and the disgusting display of pomp and ostentation stood forth in striking contrast with the soul-destroying and body-crushing miseries endured by the toiling millions throughout the length and breadth of the land.

That dreadful King, George III, in comparison with whom Nero was an angel and Caligula a saint,—and that snuffy termagaunt, Queen Charlotte, thus received the homage of the vile sycophants and the titled demireps who paid those miserable specimens of fallen humanity a worship which they had not religion enough to offer up to their Maker. The saloons of St. James's were rich, and dazzling, and brilliant with the plunder of the poor man: the produce of *his* labour was there—while he himself was starving and in rags;—and yet that execrable King and that hateful Queen bestowed not a thought upon the suffering millions over whom they ruled.

The trumpery proceedings of the levee and drawing-room took place in the usual manner,—proceedings which were more contemptible than child's-play, without the innocence of the latter: for the effect of such pompous parade and gorgeous ostentation was inevitably calculated to puff up the principal actors with an intolerable pride, and confirm them in their course of tyranny, oppression, and extravagance. But at five o'clock the whole tom-foolery was over; and while the Queen retired to her toilette-chamber to put off her robes, the King withdrew to an apartment denominated the Royal Closet, where he was in the habit of granting private audiences after the more ceremonial levee.

Scarcely had the King thus retired to that room, when a page entered to announce that a gentleman and lady, who had delivered their cards, solicited an interview in the most private manner possible. The King took the cards and started visibly when he read the name of "Mr. Meagles" upon the first: then, examining the other, he was almost inclined to fly into a rage when he beheld the name of "Lady Lade." He was about to refuse the audience solicited by those persons: but recollecting how vitally important to himself had been the object of their former visit, when he was staying at Windsor Castle, and trembling with apprehension lest some new incident had supplied them the means of coercing him at pleasure, he resolved upon seeing them.

The page was accordingly instructed to lead them by a private passage to the Royal Closet;—and in a few minutes Tim Meagles and Lady Lade once more stood in the presence of George III.

For this occasion our friend Tim had habited himself in a complete suit of black; and the riding-whip was dispensed with. Lady Lade wore her widows' weeds;—and truly handsome did she appear.

The King motioned the page to withdraw;—and so soon as he was alone with his visitors, he said in a petulant manner, where nervous suspense mingled with irritation, "Well, what is it now—what is it now?"

"May it please your Majesty," returned Meagles, "we have sought your Majesty's presence on business of the utmost importance——"

"And why did you bring *her* with you?—why did you bring *her?*" demanded the King, pointing angrily towards Letitia. "You told me last time that she was your wife—yes—your wife—Mrs. Meagles—Meagles. But it was all false—all false. George—I mean his Royal Highness—let me into the secret afterwards. He was tipsy one night—one night—I mean he was communicative one night—very communicative,—and he told me who the pretended Mrs. Meagles was. How dare you, sir—how dare you—dare you—bring that woman to me?"

"As a witness to see fair play, your Majesty," answered Meagles, with an undaunted firmness. "I have been so scurvily treated on a special occasion by your Majesty's eldest son, and the Home Office plays such queer tricks at times, that I resolved to bring a witness with me. And as the business is of a most private and confidential character, I thought your Majesty would be better pleased if I brought a friend who knows all my secrets, rather than a stranger."

"Ah! fine talk—fine talk!" ejaculated the King, in that jerking manner which was peculiar to him: then, as he surveyed the Amazon from head to foot, he said in a musing tone, "Well, upon my word, she looks as well—yes, quite as well—quite as well, in those widows' weeds as in the male apparel: quite as well! A fine woman—a very fine woman. Pity she's no better than she should be—no better than she should be," he added, these last words being inaudible alike to Meagles and the object of the monarch's musings. "And now what's the business—what's the business?" he demanded aloud, turning abruptly at the same time towards Meagles.

"Accident has thrown in my way certain important papers which intimately regard your Majesty," was the reply, delivered in a firm and measured tone.

"Papers—important papers!—what papers?" ejaculated the King, growing more and more nervous. "This is the second time you've come to me about papers. More exactions—eh! More nonsense to bother your sovereign about—eh?

Come, sir—what are these papers? Come—speak!"

"Correspondence, may it please your Majesty—memoranda—and explanatory remarks relative to a certain lady whose name cannot do otherwise than awaken disagreeable reminiscences in the mind of your Majesty:"—and as Meagles thus spoke, his looks quailed not beneath those which the monarch fixed intently upon him.

"Ah! you always harp on the same string—same string!" cried his Majesty, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions on his puffy cheeks, and his whole manner exhibiting a painful nervousness. "What papers have you got, sir? They are all forgeries—all forgeries—and I defy you. Go about your business—about your business:"—and the King, turning abruptly away from Meagles and the Amazon, walked to the farther end of the room.

"Hear me, sire!" exclaimed Tim, raising his voice with firmness and decision. "I am incapable of committing the crime which your Majesty dares impute to me: I am no forger—no, not half so much as your Majesty is a foul perjurer."

"Eh! what?—this to me? this to me?" cried George III, turning rapidly round and stamping his foot with rage, while his countenance became purple. "By heaven, sir, if you wish to sleep in the Tower——"

"No: your Majesty dares not wreak your vengeance upon me *now*!" interrupted the undaunted Tim.

"Mention the name of Miss Hannah Lightfoot at once," exclaimed the Amazon,—"and thereby afford his Majesty a clue to the purport of our business."

"Ah! that name—no—no—don't mention it—don't mention it, good people!" gasped the King, staggering back as if beneath the weight of a blow. "Come—let us talk quietly and tranquilly—without excitement. There—I will sit down," he added, throwing himself into an arm-chair. "And now, Meagles—queer name, Meagles—very queer—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated the miserable monarch, who always seemed to grow childish whenever he was much excited,—"and now, Meagles—Meagles—tell me what you want and all about it."

"In plain terms, then," said Tim, "I wish to know at what price your Majesty will purchase the *Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford: together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments.*"

And as Meagles thus spoke, he drew forth the packet of papers and read the endorsement which we have printed in italics.

"Correspondence—Lady Stamford—Memoranda—Comments," murmured the King, becoming ghastly pale, and sinking back in the arm-chair: for he saw that he was completely in the power of Meagles and the Amazon—and moreover, reminiscences of a very sad and painful nature were now agitating wildly in his brain.

"We have him, my beauty," whispered Meagles aside to the huntress.

"He is at our mercy, Tim," responded the handsome widow, likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "Do not yield under a Dukedom, mind!"

"Nothing less," returned Meagles, with a resolute air.

"My good sir," at length said the King, now giving utterance to his words in a slow, solemn, and measured manner, "you have inflicted a deep wound upon my heart—or rather, you have torn open one which was barely skinned over. I shall not attempt to appear indifferent to the subject which has thus been brought so vividly to my notice. Doubtless the honour of your King is in your keeping: speak, therefore, without reserve—and fear no interruption from me. Now, sir, what have you to say?"

And resting his right elbow upon the arm of the chair, the monarch covered his face with the hand which at the same time supported his head.

"I am well pleased that your Majesty is prepared to listen calmly and tranquilly to the observations which I am about to make," said Meagles; "and as it will save your Majesty the pain of another interview with us, I will at once proceed to glance at the nature of these documents which I hold in my possession. Your Majesty will then be enabled to judge whether it be worth while to purchase the papers from me, and whether in the remuneration that I seek I have placed too high a value upon them."

"Proceed," said the King, still retaining the attitude of profound attention and of deep dejection which he had ere now assumed as he sate in the arm-chair.

"In the year 1756," resumed Meagles, "your Majesty, being at that time his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, fell in with Miss Hannah Lightfoot and became enamoured of her. Your meetings were frequent, but innocent; and you found that the charming Quakeress was too pure to surrender herself to your wishes without marriage, or at least without the semblance or solemn promise of marriage. Thus compelled to adopt a decisive part, your Majesty—then Prince of Wales, as your son *now* is—wrote Miss Lightfoot a letter revealing your rank. This was in the month of February, 1757; and although the letter* is not in the collection which I now hold, there are many allusions to its contents in other letters which *are* in this correspondence. In the month of April, 1757, Hannah Lightfoot became your bride in the sight of heaven, the memorable certificate† to which I need not farther allude, being the means adopted by you to silence the scruples of the charming Quakeress. Towards the end of June of the same year, Miss Lightfoot found herself in a way to become a mother;‡ and she accompanied Lady Stamford to the Manor near Aylesbury. By a strange coincidence it happend that Lady Stamford had likewise just discovered that she was pregnant. Some weeks afterwards Hannah Lightfoot returned to London; and you saw her nearly every day. Things went on thus until the month of January, 1758, when you appear to have made up your mind to dissolve the connexion. You accordingly wrote a long letter to Miss Lightfoot, breaking your intention to her as delicately as you were able. Almost heart-broken, the unhappy lady fled from London, and sought her friend Lady Stamford at the Manor.§ At that period both

* This letter, dated February 9, 1757, is given at page 52, Vol I.

† Given at page 108, Vol. I.

‡ See letter, dated June 22, 1757, at page 52, Vol. I.

§ See letter dated January 6th, 1758, at page 52, Vol. I.

Miss Lightfoot and Lady Stamford were in daily expectation of becoming mothers. And, as a natural sequence to that simultaneousness of pregnancy which I have before alluded to, they were delivered within a few hours of each other. And now comes the tremendous secret which is contained in the explanatory comments appended in Lady Stamford's own hand-writing, as it appears, to the correspondence which has fallen into my possession. But your Majesty is aware of it all! Yes—your Majesty is aware that Lady Stamford's child died a few hours after its birth, and that, with the concurrence of her husband Sir William, she adopted Miss Lightfoot's child as her own!"

"It is true—too true—all too true!" groaned the unhappy monarch, writhing in his chair, but still maintaining his hand over his countenance. "Go on—go on! What more do those papers reveal?"

"Have they not already proclaimed enough?" demanded Meagles. "Or do you wish me to repeat to your Majesty how the substitution of *your* child by Hannah Lightfoot for the child of Sir William and Lady Stamford, was duly communicated to you—how you approved of the proceeding as the only means of veiling the disgrace of the beauteous Quakeress and sparing her the crowning ignominy of expulsion from her sect—and how Sir William and Lady Stamford brought up the child as their own, adopted him as their heir, and left him all their property? Does your Majesty wish me to enter into such details as these?—and does your Majesty need to be reminded that your son by the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot still lives—yes, lives in the person of that Sir Richard Stamford who has himself been so unfortunate? Ah! no wonder that he bears such a marvellous resemblance to the Royal Family of England——"

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed the King, now starting nervously from his seat: then, after passing to and fro in a state of dreadful agitation for several minutes, he suddenly stopped short—clutched Meagles violently by the arm—and said in a hollow voice, "I must have those papers! What is your price?"

"It is high, your Majesty," observed Meagles.

"Name it—name it," said the King, impatiently.

"A Dukedom!" was the startling response.

George III was rooted to the spot with the consternation that seized upon him at this demand;—and for upwards of a minute he stood with his eyes fixed in vacant wonderment on Meagles—his brows lifted—his mouth half open—and his whole aspect that of stolid amazement.

"A Dukedom!" at length he gasped forth;—and, turning abruptly away, he renewed his agitated walk to and fro in the Royal Closet.

"Don't be beaten down, Tim," whispered the Amazon, encouragingly,—"even though he should offer you a Marquisate."

"Yes, my beauty," responded Meagles: "I *will* take a Marquisate, with ten thousand a-year—but nothing less."

"Well—nothing less than a Marquisate, then," rejoined Lady Lade, in a tone of decision.

"Mr. Meagles," said the King, once more stopping short and addressing Tim in that same hollow voice which indicated feelings profoundly stirred,—"your price is too high! I could invent no possible excuse for conferring such a dignity upon you. But were your views less exalted—an Earldom, for instance——"

"I will not be too hard upon your Majesty," interrupted Tim; "and therefore I am willing to put up with a Marquisate. And surely your Majesty cannot be very fastidious upon the subject, when it is remembered that there are several Dukes in the peerage who have no better nor loftier claim to the distinction than the infamous character of their ancestresses. I allude to the titled descendants of the filthy strumpets who sold themselves to Charles II——"

"Enough, sir,—enough!" ejaculated the King, sternly: then, in a more conciliatory tone, he added, "Well—you shall have a Marquisate!"

"Ah! Tim, I always knew you would rise in the world!" exclaimed the Amazon, in a joyous tone: then, in a low and hurried whisper, she said, "And you will make me a Marchioness?"

"What does she say? what does she say?" demanded the King, his irritability returning, and his habit of reiteration along with it.

"Lady Lade desires me to bring this interview to an end as speedily as possible," returned Tim, with the utmost gravity: "inasmuch as she feels convinced it must prove painful to your Majesty."

"Did she say that? did she say that?" exclaimed the King. "Well, well—she's a good creature—a good creature. And now give me the papers—and you shall hear from me in a few days."

"Don't be such a fool, Tim," were the emphatic words which the huntress now whispered in her friend's ear.

"What does she say again? what does she say again?" cried the monarch, his nervousness increasing.

"Lady Lade most respectfully suggests," answered Meagles, with a low bow, "that it would be much more business-like to exchange the papers for the patent of nobility, and thus settle the whole thing at one and the same time."

"Eh! what? You don't mean to say you can't believe my word—my royal word?" exclaimed the King, becoming purple in the face, and fidgetting about as if he were standing with naked feet upon hot tiles.

"I am only afraid, may it please your Majesty," said Meagles, with another low bow, "that were I to deliver up the papers at present, so trifling an affair as the bestowal of a Marquisate might slip your Majesty's memory in the constant hurry, bustle, and excitement of the nation's business."

"Ah! I understand you, sir—I understand you," cried the monarch, scarcely able to restrain his spite and malignity at the galling humiliation to which he was thus subjected. "You won't take my word—my royal word—eh? But this is an insufferable insult, sir! And I am sure you don't want to insult your Sovereign, sir—insult your Sovereign? Come—did you ever know me break my word, sir? Speak—speak, man—I say. Did you ever know me to break my word?"

"Yes—and a woman's heart also!" was the dauntless reply given by Tim Meagles.

"My God! this is retribution!" murmured the wretched old monarch, as he staggered back and sank once more into the arm-chair: then covering his face with his hands, and apparently ceasing to recollect that any one was present to observe or hear him, he exclaimed in a voice of bitter anguish.

"O Hannah Lightfoot! Hannah Lightfoot! thou art avenged—terribly avenged *now!*"

And the scalding tears trickled between the shrivelled fingers of George III.

For, oh! to the memory of this old man came back, with a whelming tide, all the incidents of his early love,—all his false vows—all his unredeemed pledges—all his flagrant perjury! Vivid and blasting, as the lightning flash, came it all back: crushing and annihilating as the thunder-stroke, fell the tremendous weight of recollections upon his mind! Monarch though he were, he was compelled to feel as a man: tyrant as he was over his millions of enslaved subjects, enslaved in return was he to the merciless despotism of his own conscience. Miserable, miserable King! how little wast thou *then!*—how insignificant in the bitterness of thy woe!

From the towering height of his lofty station and from the dizzy summit of his insatiable ambition, did he command the attention of the universe,—he who could not command a single one of all the agonising thoughts that racked him now! He who awed the nations, shrank appalled from the ghastliness of his own ideas. The man who had sought to retain the glorious gem of transatlantic power in his own regal diadem,—who was even at that moment studying to roll back the portentous tide of democracy which was sweeping over France and threatening to dash its waves against the white cliffs of Albion,—who kept his people enchained in iron bonds and sent forth his armies to ride rough-shod over the necks of his wronged subjects when assembling to petition for their rights,—he who did and was doing all this, was now crouching, and cowering, and grovelling beneath the spectral shapes which his own imagination conjured up! Yes—the monarch who lacerated the millions with knotted scourges, now felt his own conscience whipped with scorpions;—and he who had no remorse for the countless hearts which his tyranny made to weep so bitterly, was now himself inwardly shedding tears of blood in the compunction of his soul for the memory of Hannah Lightfoot!

For several minutes did George III thus remain a prey to the most torturing reflections,—utterly unmindful of the presence of Tim Meagles and the Amazon, who were all the while exchanging looks of satisfaction at the evident success of their projects. At length the King suddenly recollected their presence: and, ashamed of the emotions to which he had given way, his Majesty wiped away the tears from his cheeks—smothered his harrowing sensations as well as he was able—and, rising from the arm-chair, said, "Mr. Meagles you shall have the Marquisate as soon as the affair can be arranged."

"With a pension to enable me to support the title?" added Tim.

"Be it so," rejoined his Majesty: then, after a few moments' deep reflection, he said, "But this matter must be managed without scandal—or rather, with as little scandal as possible. You know that you have no ostensible or apparent claims upon the Crown for any reward or recompense at all: we must therefore *invent* those claims. Do you understand me?"

"To some extent, sire," answered Tim. "What does your Majesty propose?"

"I will examine the list of extinct peerages without delay," returned the King, speaking in a slow and measured tone; "and we will pitch upon some Marquisate, to which you shall lay claim. The necessary documents to establish that claim can easily be prepared; and when the matter comes before the proper Committee in the House of Lords, I will take care that the decision shall be rendered in your favour. This may be an affair of some months: indeed, it cannot possibly be settled until the beginning of next year:—and in the meantime——"

"In the meantime the papers shall be sealed up and religiously kept from every eye," added Meagles.

"It is to your own interest to observe that condition of our bargain," said the King. "Our interview is now at an end."

And bowing slightly, his Majesty turned abruptly away: while Tim Meagles and the Amazon withdrew, overjoyed at the complete success that had attended their second visit to the King of England.

CHAPTER CCI.

THE SEARCH AFTER A SON.—HORROR!

Early on the ensuing morning the Court removed from London to Windsor Castle;—and George III, who had exhibited symptoms of alarming restlessness and irritability from the moment of his interview with Meagles and Lady Lade, shut himself up in his own apartment under pretence of having several State documents to examine.

The unhappy monarch now experienced a deep and irresistible yearning to behold his son;—not either of those sons whom his wife Queen Charlotte had borne him,—but that son who had owed his existence to the amour with Hannah Lightfoot.

The reader may have seen from the terms in which Meagles explained the nature of the correspondence and other papers in his possession, that the King had all along been aware of the substitution of his own child by the beauteous Quakeress for the dead offspring of Sir William and Lady Stamford. Such was indeed the case. From the very first the monarch knew of that circumstance: but as years and years rolled on, he had thought less and less of the fact that he had an unacknowledged son in the world. Hannah Lightfoot carried the secret with her to the grave;—and Sir William and Lady Stamford died also without breathing that secret to a soul. Thus when the present Sir Richard Stamford succeeded to the title and estates, it was under the impression that he really and truly was the son of the deceased baronet and his lady;—and King George III, perceiving how religiously the secret had been kept, never felt the least inclination to enlighten Sir Richard upon the point.

When Sir Richard's misfortunes commenced and he was accused of the fearful crimes recorded in the opening chapter of our tale, the King experienced emotions of sorrow and alarm at the predicament in which that man who was really his son had become involved. But he dared not interfere: and he was compelled likewise to throw a

veil over his affliction—or at least attribute it to some other cause. The newspapers of the time had represented the fact of the extraordinary resemblance which Sir Richard Stamford bore to the Royal Family;—and the King often sighed profoundly in secret as those statements recalled so vividly to his recollection all the incidents of his early love and his amour with Hannah Lightfoot. It had been therefore with an unfeigned joy that his Majesty, after anxiously watching the progress of events and greedily devouring all that the public prints detailed with regard to Sir Richard Stamford,—it was with an indescribable relief, we say, that the King read at length of the baronet's complete exculpation from the monstrous charges laid against him.

And now that any circumstances connected with the amour of his earlier years was brought back more vividly than ever to the memory of the monarch,—now that his interview with Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade had bared the wounds that time had failed to heal altogether,—and now that the minutest associations belonging to the history and fate of Hannah Lightfoot, were aroused to new life in the depth of his soul,—it is not to be wondered at if the miserable monarch were led by those reminiscences and those feelings to experience a strong, a natural, and irresistible yearning at least to behold the man on whom he had stamped his image.

Persons who have offended against the laws of society or of nature, are oft-times moved by singular and irresistible impulses to revisit the scene of their iniquity, even though years and years may have passed away—or else to make atonement by anonymous means to the individuals whom they wronged in earlier days. The undetected murderer is sure to experience a hankering and longing to return to the spot where he buried his victim; and the inscrutable hand of destiny will be certain sooner or later to conduct him thither, even in spite of himself. The man

who has gathered gold in the nastiest ways, remembers at length the petty sums which he pilfered when a boy from his master's till: and in an anonymous letter he returns the amount, with interest and compound interest duly reckoned—and then his conscience is satisfied. In the same manner does compunction frequently smite the hearts of men who have succeeded in what is called "defrauding the revenue;" and hence those anonymous remittances to the Chancellor of the Exchequer which are acknowledged day after day in the *Times* newspaper. Such is the wondrous texture of the human mind; and therefore it cannot be a matter for astonishment if King George III now experienced those inscrutable yearnings which prompted him to seek out his son and at least set eyes upon him once in this world, if not to reveal to his ears the tremendous secret of their close affinity.

Throughout the day following his interview with Meagles and the huntress at St James's Palace, this inclination grew stronger and stronger in the breast of the King. It settled down into one of those invincible longings which so often take possession of the human mind, especially when in a morbid state: it assumed the character of an irresistible craving that would upset the very reason if not gratified.

Hours passed away thus, while the monarch at one time paced his apartment in a condition of fearful excitement, and at another flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to the bitterest anguish. The image of Hannah Lightfoot seemed to haunt him,—to stand before him whichever way he turned his looks—to be *there*, in his presence, even though he shut his eyes with the thought of testing the reality of the apparition. He saw her, young and lovely as she was when he first knew her,—but with a melancholy air subduing the captivating sweetness and the winning charms of her modest beauty;—he saw her with her sylph-like form so full of the elegance and grace which her sectarian dress set off and did not mar;—he saw her with those melting liquid eyes, so full of a mournful tenderness, and with the roses of her lips parted by the saddest smile above the strings of pearls that shone between! Yes—it was thus he saw her *now*,—saw her only in imagination, it was true,—but still saw her as plainly, and as clearly, and as visibly as if she were indeed there as a being of flesh and blood!

"Oh! do not haunt me thus, Hannah—do not haunt me thus!" exclaimed the King aloud, in the bitterness of his mental misery, "Ah! I wronged thee—my God! I wronged thee—I know that I wronged thee! But thou wilt forgive me, Hannah—thou wilt forgive me! Oh! do not look so reproachfully upon me! I will see our son—I will assure myself that he is happy. Ah! now thou seemest to smile, Hannah: thou art pleased by that promise! Well, then, I will propitiate thy shade: thou shalt sleep tranquilly in thy tomb! Yes—I will see our son;—and if he be poor, I will enrich him—if he be ambitious, I will ennoble him—if he be in sorrow, I will sympathise with him. But thou dost not require that I shall tell him who he really is?—thou dost not demand that I shall confess to him the secret of his birth? Oh! now thy looks become sombre again! Well, then, I will reveal to him even *that*: yes, thy shade shall be appeased, Hannah—only do not haunt me thus!"

And then the image of the long dead Quakeress appeared to grow fainter and fainter—dying away in a gossamer transparency, until it seemed to mingle with the ambient air.

Then the monarch, considerably tranquillised, but having resolved to lose no time in adopting measures to search for his unacknowledged son, quitted his chamber and joined the Royal Family at the dinner-table. When the repast was concluded,—it being now about eight o'clock in the evening,—the King retired again to his own apartment, whither he summoned a confidential page.

"Listen attentively to what I am about to say to you," began the monarch, in a calm and deliberate voice. "You have doubtless heard of a certain Sir Richard Stamford, who possessed near Aylesbury a mansion which, as I have been told, he disposed of some months since to Lord Desborough?"

"I have not only heard of that same Sir Richard Stamford, sire," answered the page: "but I know him well by sight. Indeed, I saw him this morning——"

"This morning!" ejaculated the King: "this morning—eh? Where did you see him, sir—where did you see him?"

"May it please your Majesty, Sir Richard Stamford dwells in the immediate vicinity of Windsor," returned the page: "and he frequently walks in the park. His extraordinary resemblance to your most gracious Majesty's son, the Prince of Wales, is the theme of conversation in Windsor."

"Do you know exactly where he lives?" demanded the monarch, after a few minutes' reflection.

"I do, sire," was the response.

"Then lead me thither, young gentleman," said the King. "I must see this Richard Stamford upon business of private importance. And, hark you, sir—take care that no one knows of the visit which I am about to pay him."

The page bowed submission to this command; and he and the King sallied forth from the Castle by the most secret means of egress.

The distance which they had to traverse was not very great; and when they arrived within sight of the house which the page pointed out to the monarch, his Majesty bade the youth return to the Castle.

A strange feeling now seized upon George III, as he paused for a moment to contemplate that dwelling which stood out, in the solitude of its site, from amidst the scene that was otherwise dimly outlined in the obscurity of the evening: and a sensation which appeared to him like a presentiment of evil, gradually crept over his entire frame.

At length, summoning all his presence of mind to aid him in a course along which an irresistible power seemed to be impelling him, the monarch approached the door, at which he knocked gently. The summons was soon answered by the landlady—an old woman of respectable appearance;—and, by the light which she carried in her hand, she immediately recognised the King.

"Hush!" said his Majesty, perceiving that he was known: and, entering the passage, he asked, "Is Sir Richard Stamford within?"

"Yes, sire," returned the landlady. "But——"

"Not another word!" said the King, cutting short whatever objection she was about to make. "Which is his apartment?"

"Up stairs, may it please your Majesty," rejoined the old woman. "I will show your Majesty the way."

"No—I will go alone," he observed. "There—keep the candle for a few moments at the foot of the stairs—and don't follow me."

The landlady saw that the King was much agitated; and, with that habit of passive obedience which is engendered by the servile and degraded condition of all the humbler ranks in this wretched country, she dared not give utterance to the words that were nevertheless trembling at the tip of her tongue. For she knew that Sir Richard Stamford was *not* alone;—and although she was unaware of the name and high position of the lady who was wont to visit him, but who always came so closely veiled as to defy the most piercing observation to catch a glimpse of her countenance,—the old woman nevertheless felt assured that her lodger and his fair companion did not wish to be disturbed, even by the visit of Royalty.

But she held her peace through awe and dread of that King whom she had been taught to look upon as a being second only to the god-head;—and even with that debased and servile feeling of mingled terror and veneration, was united one of gratification at the thought that her humble abode should be thus honoured by the presence of Royalty. Honoured, indeed!—a precious honour to have that scrofulous, sanctimonious, blood-thirsty old tyrant crossing her threshold!

However, there she stood at the foot of the stairs—holding the candle in her hand, while the King ascended with a somewhat hasty step. On reaching the landing he opened the door that immediately faced him;—but he was suddenly struck with an appalling consternation at the spectacle which met his eyes. Yet what baleful scene—what terrible aspect had paralysed and transfixed him thus? Behold! Sir Richard Stamford was seated upon a sofa—and half reclining in his arms was her Royal Highness the Princess Amelia!

So deeply absorbed were the tender pair in the vows and pledges of love which they were breathing in murmured tones to each other, and in the fervid caresses which they intermingled with their discourse, that they heard not the opening of the door: but all on a sudden it was closed with violence, and an ejaculation of horror blended with a poignant anguish smote simultaneously upon their ears.

They started up—and a stifled shriek burst from the lips of the Princess Amelia as her eyes encountered the ghastly looks of her royal father: then, throwing herself at his feet, she extended her clasped hands towards him, exclaiming, "Pardon me—pardon me, beloved parent—have mercy upon me!"

"Unhappy girl!" cried the King, fearfully agitated and unable to control his words: "you know not what you have done nor whom you love—for that man is your brother!"

"No, no, dear father!" exclaimed the Princess: "it is only a wondrous likeness which deceives you—this is Sir Richard Stamford!"

"I know it—I know it," groaned the unhappy monarch: "but he is my son—the offspring of Hannah Lightfoot——"

"O horror!" exclaimed the baronet: and sinking upon the sofa, he covered his face with his hands and gave irresistible vent to the convulsive anguish of his soul.

"Just heaven! what mean you, father?" cried the Princess Amelia at the same moment—and she sprang from her kneeling posture like a corpse that is galvanised.

"I mean," said the King, staggering beneath the weight of a tremendous affliction and speaking in a hollow voice,—"I mean that in my youth I loved and seduced a heavenly creature—and that Sir Richard Stamford——"

"Oh! say no more—say no more!" murmured the Princess, tottering to a seat, on which she fell: "he is my brother—my brother—and God will avenge this incest!"

"Incest! no—no—do not say *that!*" exclaimed the wretched King, shivering all over: "you have not been thus far culpable, Amelia?—tell me that you have not!"

But the unhappy Princess made no reply. Pale as marble, and with arms hanging straight down as if she had lost their use, Amelia reclined back in the chair—her eyes fixed with a vacant wildness upon the ghastly and convulsing countenance of the King.

And now this miserable monarch could no longer repress the groans and anguished sobs that bespoke all the horror of the ideas agitating in his brain, and affording so unquestionable a confirmation of the appalling truth of the tale of incest which had thus reached its crowning catastrophe.

No pen can describe the full horror of the scene:—no power of language can do justice to the exquisite agony that was experienced by the baronet, the tremendous remorse and withering self-reproaches endured by the monarch, or the dumb and blank despair that had seized upon the guilty girl. Never—oh! never did the four walls of a room enclose three human beings so utterly stricken by all the most rending or annihilating feelings that the human breast can know: never was the atmosphere of a dwelling-place so laden with passionate ejaculations of bitter misery, or pierced by looks of such wild and fearful meaning. For the word *Incest* had stricken like a moral pestilence upon two hearts that a few moments before were beating with fervid love, and had excited in a third heart all the excruciating agonies of remorse. Hell seemed to have opened at the feet of those three beings: demons appeared to hold them in their infernal grasp;—and their very souls had become bottomless pits wherein their feelings were stinging them like scorpions.

At length Sir Richard Stamford suddenly started from his seat;—and clutching the monarch violently by the arm, he said in a hollow tone, "Is all this true?—or is it a hideous dream?"

"It is true—it is true," sobbed the almost heart-broken monarch. "You are my son—and yet I dare not embrace you, after the appalling discovery that has just been made!"

"No—no—you cannot embrace me—I feel that you can not!" groaned the baronet. "But you will not curse me——"

"Holy God! it is for you, Richard, to curse *me!*" exclaimed the King, writhing in the anguish of his spirit.

"Curse not—neither the one nor the other!" cried the Princess Amelia, recalled to sense and recollection by that awful word which fell like the voice of the dead upon her ears: then, slowly rising from her seat, and fixing upon her father's countenance a look so woe-begone and so full of horror that it froze all the blood in his veins and made him feel as if some hideous destiny were impelling him on to become the executioner of his own child, she said in a voice that was tremulous but painfully clear, "Remember that there is still one sorrow and one in-

famy greater and more terrible than what we already know—and that is *exposure before the world!*"

"True!" ejaculated the King. "These very walls may have ears!"

"Silence for a moment!" said the baronet: and noiselessly opening the door, he looked forth upon the staircase and listened. "We are safe thus far—and the dreadful secret is known but to us three," he observed, returning into the room and shutting the door. "All is quiet in the house—and besides, the worthy couple to whom it belongs are not eaves-droppers."

"The secret, then, remains with ourselves — and with our consciences," said the Princess Amelia, the accent of despair marking the latter portion of the sentence. "But what brought you hither, father?—and does any one suspect or know that I have been accustomed to visit this house——"

"It was no hint nor information of that kind which brought me here to-night," interrupted the King. "Nature's yearnings prompted me to seek an interview with that son who knew not the secret of his birth, and whom perhaps I should not have acknowledged, had not the scene which burst upon my eyes evoked the dread revelation from my lips. But tell me, unhappy children—tell me—are you privately married?—has the ceremony of the church seemed to consecrate this love of yours?"

"Ah! how could a Princess of the blood-royal go through such a mock form? and who would celebrate the rite?" demanded Amelia bitterly. "No, sire—our love has been in every way unblest: and now it is positively accursed," she added, sinking back upon the chair and giving vent to her renewed anguish in a flood of scalding tears.

"Weep not, Amelia—weep not, I conjure you!" exclaimed the baronet, himself almost overcome with a fresh paroxysm of bitter feeling. "The past cannot be recalled—nor even expiated," he continued, in a voice convulsed with anguish: "but penitence and deep contrition may atone for somewhat of its enormity. God knows that we sinned in ignorance of these close ties of kinship?"

"Come, my unhappy Amelia," said the King; "and let us return home. The prolongation of this wretched scene will only plunge us all into a deeper abyss of woe—if that be possible. Richard, I will see you again shortly—when our minds shall have become more composed."

But the miserable baronet heard not the words which his royal father thus addressed to him. With his head buried in his hands, he sate writhing and weeping upon the sofa;—and when he raised his eyes again, at the expiration of a few minutes, he found himself alone.

CHAPTER CCII.

THE MILLINER AND HER MASTER.

THE scene once more shifts to Mrs. Brace's elegantly furnished little parlour at her house in Pall Mall; and between ten and eleven o'clock at night we shall find her seated in that room where she had received in her time so many distinguished visitors.

She was not alone upon the present occasion. Mr. Frederick Dray, metamorphosed into a fine gentleman, was her companion;—and having just returned from a gambling-house where he had been losing a considerable sum of money, he was in a particularly bad humour. Moreover, the man had felt unwell for the last two or three days;—and as it was the first time in all his life that he had suffered from indisposition, he was not very patient under the influence of the disagreeable sensations which he experienced.

The milliner herself was much altered. Her countenance was haggard and care-worn; and the rouge upon her cheeks only rendered her aspect the more ghastly. Her eyes, once so fine, were sunken and hollow: their lustre had become dimmed—and the flesh was blue around them. Her figure had lost much of its glorious *embonpoint;* and, although still stout, it no longer wore the appearance of plumpness and firmness which formerly constituted the voluptuous richness of her contours. There was still the same elegant neatness in her apparel—still the same coquetry in her Parisian cap: but the effect was no longer what it was wont to be — and the most careless eye could now perceive that those aids of an exquisite toilette which had recently set off the milliner's charms to the best advantage, were now called into requisition to conceal the decay of her fading beauty.

The hue of her lips was less vivid—and although the teeth were as fine as ever, the smile that occasionally revealed them was sickly and wan. The motions and attitudes of the milliner had lost their buxom graces and their elasticity: they were now languid and drooping. A melancholy inflection had subdued the harmonious joyousness of her voice: care was in every look—woe upon every feature—sorrow in every accent;—and the buxom, gay, and wanton Mrs. Brace had become changed in the course of a short time into the fading, broken-spirited, and passionless woman.

The supper was spread upon the table, and two or three bottles of wine stood upon the buffet ready to be decanted if required, when Mr. Frederick Dray entered the room. Tossing down his hat in a corner, he flung himself into an arm-chair with the unmistakable self-abandonment of a man who is ill at ease alike in mind and body: then fixing his eyes upon Mrs. Brace, he said in a savage tone, "Well, always these mournful looks whenever I come home! What the devil does it mean?"

"I have told you over and over again, Frederick," answered the milliner, in a deep, sorrowful voice, "that I am unhappy—very unhappy; and I cannot therefore control my looks."

"Then why don't you drink champagne and drown care?" demanded Dray, brutally.

"Because when the effect goes off and the period of reaction comes," replied the woman, "I feel so miserable that I am afraid to be alone, lest I should commit suicide. *This* also have I told you before a dozen times; and yet you are always putting the same question to me."

"Because I hate to see you look so cursed unhappy," rejoined Dray. "Wretchedness is catching — and when you're in bad spirits like this I always begin to feel such dismal forebodings. In fact I don't know what the devil has been the matter with me for the last three or four days: but one thing is certain—that I am deucedly out of sorts."

"Will you not take any supper?" asked the milliner, but only with a sort of mechanical formality and not with any manifestation of tender concern for her paramour's indisposition.

"No—I can't eat," he replied; "and what's worse, I seem to have got a nausea for drinking also."

"The excitement of gambling is killing you," observed Mrs. Brace, coldly.

"Ah! you say that, because I have made some tolerably heavy drains upon your purse lately—or rather *our* purse," exclaimed Frederick: "for we are as good as man and wife, although you won't have the nuptial knot tied. But, however, *that* doesn't matter much, seeing that we live together just the same as if ten thousand parsons had spoken what they call the marriage blessing. Now, my dear, when I first insisted upon our entering on this pleasant and agreeable understanding together, you prated a great deal about such a step being the ruin of your establishment——"

"I told you, Frederick," interposed Mrs. Brace, with some degree of warmth, "that if you persisted in placing yourself on terms of equality with me and becoming the master of the house, the business would be injured in every way. And my words have come true. All my rich patrons have deserted the establishment in St. James's Square—and day after day the custom of the millinery department is falling off."

"Is it indeed, though?" exclaimed Dray.

"I have already assured you more than once that such is the fact," returned Mrs. Brace.

"Well, perhaps you have," said the man, now resuming his wonted manner of careless indifference: "but I don't recollect everything unpleasant you tell me. As for how the business in either establishment can fall off, I really don't understand: because none of the patrons of the accommodation-house in the Square could possibly have supposed that you were immaculate—especially as most of them have no doubt enjoyed your favours at one time or another;—and why the fashionable demireps who used to frequent the shop and show-rooms, should leave you because you now live openly with a lover instead of conducting your little amours on the sly, I can't understand either."

"If I were to explain the matter to you, Frederick," said Mrs. Brace, "you would only be offended—and then we should have one of those violent scenes to which you so readily give way and which have not been the most insignificant causes of the wretchedness that is crushing me."

"'Pon my soul I won't say an angry word if you'll explain yourself," observed the ex-footman. "Somehow or another I feel in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night. So speak out—and don't be afraid."

"Well, then," resumed Mrs. Brace, "if I had taken a lord or a well-born gentleman to live openly with me, I should not have been deserted by one of my old friends and numerous patrons—no, nor yet by my lady-customers in the millinery department. But they will never forgive me for having raised a footman from the kitchen to the parlour."

"Then curse them all for their impudence!" growled Dray, savagely.

"Ah! it is very easy to curse them," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, warming with her subject: "but curses won't replenish the till in the shop, nor put gold into my private purse;—and at the rate which you are going on, we shall soon be ruined—utterly ruined. Do you know how much money—hard cash, I mean—you have had of me during the few weeks of our connexion in this manner?"

"Oh! I suppose you keep an account, then?" said Dray, gloomily.

"To be sure I do," returned Mrs. Brace: "and I can tell you that between three and four thousand pounds have been lost by you at the gaming-table, in addition to the extravagant mode of living which you have introduced into the house. Things can't go on as they are—and I am therefore glad you are in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night."

"I am infernally out of sorts," said Dray, who really looked very unwell and sate uneasily in his chair; "and I suppose it's because I am not well, that I have got gloomy ideas in my head. Come, I'll forgive you for what you told me about elevating a footman from the kitchen to the parlour; and I'll reason with you tranquilly and quietly over our position and our plans. What would you advise?"

"Let us leave the country and go to America," said Mrs. Brace. "I am sick and tired of England: besides—there is the constant danger," she added, a deep gloom suddenly overspreading her countenance, "of a discovery——"

"Hush! I know what you mean—I should be a fool if I didn't," interrupted Frederick Dray: then, with a significant look, he added, "And you know, my dear, you had some very serious thoughts of bolting off to America and leaving me in the lurch, just after that affair of Mobbs: but I surprised you—discovered your secret intent——"

"Well, well—we need talk no more of that," cried Mrs. Brace, impatiently. "I gave you a solemn pledge to abandon that project, at least until you were disposed to fall into my views: and I have kept my word."

"Yes—because I threatened to blow your brains out if I caught you at any tricks again," observed Frederick, with a renewal of his savage tone and manner.

"Why treat me thus harshly, when we are discoursing together upon serious matters?" said Mrs. Brace, the tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Come, come—no whimpering now!" ejaculated Dray. "It is this cursed feeling of uneasiness which I experience all over," he added, in a milder voice, "which makes me cross towards you. I have got a head-ache, and a general unpleasant feeling throughout my body. But what were we talking about? Oh! I remember—you propose to leave England and be off to America. Well—I am not so averse to that plan as I was some weeks ago. London then appeared full of pleasures to me: but now I am surfeited with them—nauseated—almost disgusted. And since you assure me that the business is falling off——"

"You cannot doubt it!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "Three months ago I had eleven young ladies in the establishment: and now there are but three. Rachel Forrester wanted to come back again yesterday, after the severe illness which followed her confinement;—and I was compelled to refuse the poor girl's application. All my economy does not counterbalance your wasteful expenditure: and although since Harriet left, I have not engaged another lady's-maid——"

"Ah! poor Harriet—she has been confined, too," observed Dray, with a heartless indifference of manner. "Let me see—her month is pretty nearly up—and she will be wanting to come back——"

"Or else to be well provided for," added Mrs. Brace. "Heavens! what trouble that young woman has given me! The coaxings and threats—the entreaties and menaces that I have used—the money I have given her—the difficulty I had in persuading her to leave the house ere her condition became visible——"

"Well, well—you needn't recapitulate all these

things, Fanny," interrupted Frederick Dray. "I am not ignorant of what you have had to contend with on that score."

"Yes—and on others likewise," added Mrs. Brace, with a tone of bitter anguish. "Surely you have not forgotten those two vile women who came some weeks ago——"

"Elizabeth Marks and Poll Price, I think they called themselves — eh?" observed the ex-footman. "Well they asked us about Mobbs—and if it hadn't been for your cursed trembling and stammering, I should have thrown them completely off the scent."

"How absurdly you talk, Frederick," said the milliner, in a low and hollow whisper,—"when you *must* remember that those women already knew too much —that they had heard from Mobbs sufficient to convince them that Grumley had experienced foul play beneath this roof——Nay, more," continued Mrs. Brace, horror convulsing her form and rendering her countenance hideously ghastly, — "they said they could even point out the place where Grumley was interred——"

"Well—and you gave them five hundred pounds to make them hold their tongues," interrupted Frederick Dray. Nothing was more simple: "they came to extort money—they had us in their power—your fears confirmed all their suspicions—and so we were obliged to shell out."

"And think you that those women will not come back again?" asked Mrs. Brace. "I tell you that we are surrounded by a myriad dangers—that perils and perplexities of all kinds environ us—and that they will gradually close in upon us in such a manner as to render escape impossible. My God! you see, Frederick, the change that care and terror are working in me! I cannot conceal the truth from myself—I am getting prematurely old—and in a few months I shall become faded, decrepit, and gray as a woman of sixty—I who am still in the prime of life! Let us leave England, then, ere it be too late: let us proceed to America while we have yet enough left to convey us thither and establish us in some business on our arrival. Here—in this country—we are a constant prey to the extortioner. Those women will return—depend upon it, they will return shortly;—and Harriet will likewise prove a drag upon us. Say, then, Frederick—shall we fly together——"

"Give me four-and-twenty hours to consider upon it, Fanny," exclaimed the ex-footman; "and most likely my decision shall be in accordance with your wishes. But this cursed uneasy feeling is growing upon me so rapidly——"

"You do indeed look very unwell," observed the milliner. "Shall I send for a doctor?—or will you go to bed and take some medicine?"

"Neither," returned Dray. "I mistrust doctors and can't bear physic. Perhaps it is the excitement of that cursed gaming-table; and a good night's rest will take it all away."

"Ah! a good night's rest," murmured the unhappy woman, with a profound sigh. "Would to heaven that I might enjoy one! But let me offer you a glass of wine—some of your favourite champagne," she hastened to observe, perceiving that Frederick's brow grew overcast at the renewal of her melancholy musings.

"Yes—give me a glass of champagne," he said, pettishly: "I can but see what it will do for me."

The milliner rose from her seat—uncorked a bottle of Epernay—and, filling a glass, presented it while yet effervescing to her paramour. The man took it in his hand and raised it to his lips: but some indescribable feeling of nausea and loathing prompted him to repel it—and hastily giving back the glass to Mrs. Brace, he said in a shuddering tone, "By heavens! I am very ill."

The milliner now once more urged upon him the necessity of going to bed; and Dray yielded to her persuasion. It was with some difficulty that he could ascend the stairs: a violent headache and an increasing sense of weakness combined not only to distract him but also to paralyse his physical energies. But when once he had laid aside his apparel and had retired to rest, he felt somewhat better. Still, however, he refused to have any professional advice or take medicine; and in a few minutes he fell asleep.

Mrs. Brace, who had assisted him in ascending to the bed-chamber, now retraced her way down stairs to assure herself, according to custom, that the house was all safe ere she retired for the night. She dismissed the servants to their respective rooms—locked up the plate and wine—and was about to rejoin her paramour, when a low double knock at the front door fell upon her ears.

She started and shuddered all over—for the guilty conscience is as easily rufiled by the most ordinary circumstances as the aspen by the gentlest breezes: but recovering her presence of mind, she proceeded to answer the summons.

On opening the front door, she beheld by the lamp-light a black youth dressed in the apparel of a page, and who immediately inquired in a soft musical voice "whether he had the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Brace." The milliner responded in the affirmative; and the sable visitor thereupon besought a few minutes' private conversation upon a matter of some importance.

CHAPTER CCIII.

RAO AND THE MILLINER.

Mrs. Brace at once led the black page into her parlour, where the lights were still burning upon the table; and having requested him to be seated, she could not help admiring the great beauty of his person. The symmetry of his shape was admirably set off by the livery which he wore; and there was an air of gracefulness and gentility about him which was well calculated to interest even the most callous observer. His hair was of the glossiest sable, but fine as silk: and it showered in a thousand ringlets over his sloping shoulders. His large black eyes beamed with the fires of intellect; and between the scarlet lips the teeth shone like rows of pearls.

Rao—for the reader has doubtless experienced no difficulty in recognising Lord Florimel's sable page in the person of Mrs. Brace's visitor—Rao, we say, seated himself in compliance with the invitation so courteously given. But whether he felt somewhat embarrassed at the earnest attention with which the milliner surveyed him from the moment she escorted him into the room —or whether it were a purely accidental circumstance, we cannot say: sure enough, however, it was that scarcely had he taken a chair when he turned himself round in such a manner as to place his back to the candles. His looks then wandered rapidly over Mrs. Brace's countenance and entire form;—and

for a moment—a single moment—his dark eyes flamed with the light of malignant satisfaction. But this expression was so transitory—so evanescent, that the milliner could not have observed it, even if Rao's face had been turned towards the candles.

"Madam," he said, at length breaking silence, "I have to apologise in the first instance for disturbing you at this unseemly hour: but I was led to believe that you are not in the habit of retiring very early, and moreover that the mention of Lord Florimel's name would guarantee me against your displeasure——"

"Ah! you are in the service of his lordship?" inquired Mrs. Brace, who, from old habits and associations, felt herself suddenly cheered by the evident fact that she was not altogether forgotten by one of her best and most liberal patrons.

"I am not only in the service, but likewise in the confidence of his lordship," returned Rao: "and he has deputed me to wait upon you, madam, to assist in a somewhat difficult and certainly very romantic enterprise in which he is engaged. He moreover charged me to intimate, with all due delicacy, that your reward shall be liberal."

"It is by no means necessary to give me that assurance, my pretty boy," said the milliner, with a more sunny smile than any that had played upon her countenance for some time past. "Tell me how I can forward the views of my dear friend Florimel—and he shall find me as ready and anxious to serve him as ever."

"No doubt," remarked the sable page with a laconic dryness which for a moment struck the milliner as peculiar. "His lordship," Rao hastened to observe, "has always spoken of you, madam, in the kindest and indeed the most affectionate terms——"

"I am charmed to hear that I still retain your master's friendship," observed Mrs. Brace, now ceasing to remember the strange tone in which the curt remark of Rao had been uttered a few moments previously. "I heard that his lordship had been absent from home for some weeks; and I was likewise informed that his lordship had suffered from severe indisposition previous to his departure."

"True enough, madam," said Rao. "And now, with your permission," he continued, "I will give you such explanations as time and circumstances permit."

"I am all attention," observed the milliner, forgetting for the moment her cares and troubles in the excitement of a resuscitating spirit of intrigue."

"I must begin, madam, by informing you," proceeded Rao, "that my master Lord Florimel has become desperately enamoured of a lady——"

"Do you mean Miss Pauline Clarendon?" interrupted the milliner.

"No, madam: his lordship is completely cured of that silly and romantic passion," answered Rao; "and he now loves one who possesses an ardour of temperament and a voluptuousness of disposition quite equal to his own. But the splendid creature who has thus ensnared his heart and gained a complete empire over him, is a being shrouded in the deepest and most impenetrable mystery,—a mystery which, for some reasons unknown alike to my noble master and myself, must endure until *after* the nuptial knot shall have been tied. In plain terms, madam, this lady will not reveal either her name or her countenance until the matrimonial ceremony shall have united her to Lord Florimel by indissoluble bonds."

"What!" ejaculated the milliner, profoundly surprised: "do you mean to tell me that his lordship is in love with a lady whose features he has never seen?"

"Such is indeed the fact, madam," replied Rao, "extraordinary as it may seem. But that she is gloriously handsome, Lord Florimel is convinced; and assuredly a disagreeable countenance never could have been united by nature with such a splendid form. That her features *are* perfect, however, he entertains no doubt: for in the darkness and secrecy of the boudoirs of love where they have met—alike at Dover and in London—his hand has wandered over her countenance, tracing its configuration and thereby ascertaining the shape of every lineament."

"Then this lady is not a model of chastity and virtue?" said the milliner, inquiringly."

"With *that*, madam, you and I have no concern," answered Rao. "Suffice it for us to know that she chooses to enshroud herself in the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable mystery, until the bonds of marriage shall have made Lord Florimel her own—and then the imperious necessity which now renders her as it were a living, breathing, loving enigma, will exist no longer. The veil will be torn from her countenance as well as from her rank and name;—and from all that she has told my master, it appears certain that he will not have to repent of the match."

"But this is the most extraordinary romance that I ever became acquainted with!" cried Mrs. Brace, in unfeigned amazement. "Surely no such infatuation was ever heard of before: and for an experienced, intelligent, worldly-minded man like Lord Florimel to have yielded to this enchantment and succumb to what after all may prove a dreadful delusion——"

"Madam," said Rao, now interrupting the milliner with some degree of impatience, "I beseech you to observe that I have not sought your presence for the purpose of discussing these affairs. My object is to learn whether you will aid in conducting them to that issue on which both the lady and my noble master are fully and unalterably agreed?"

"I have already given you my assurances in that respect," answered Mrs. Brace. "Proceed, you interesting boy—and I will endeavour to forbear from any further comment upon this adventure, singular and almost incredible though it be."

"Ah! madam," exclaimed Rao, "the world is full of singular and scarcely credible proceedings; and doubtless your experience will at once suggest many particulars and incidents only too well calculated to confirm the remark that I have just made."

"True, true!" cried Mrs. Brace, somewhat troubled for the instant by the piercing, searching, peculiar look which the black page fixed upon her; but as his eyes were almost immediately withdrawn from her countenance, the effect of that deeply penetrating gaze was as speedily forgotten. "And now, my young friend, in what manner can I assist your noble master's projects?" she inquired: "what is the nature of the service that is demanded of me?"

"To-morrow evening, madam," returned Rao, "Lord Florimel will be in London. His mysterious charmer was to have come back to the metropolis to-day: and no doubt she has fulfilled her intention in this respect. I also arrived from Dover this evening, having been admitted into the confidence of his lordship and entrusted by him with the management of the necessary preparations for the marriage."

"Ah! then the ceremony is to take place shortly?" said Mrs. Brace.

"To-morrow evening, if possible," replied Rao: "and in this house, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not!" exclaimed the milliner, who was now considerably interested in a proceeding which promised a handsome recompense. "But wherefore all this mystery—this privacy?—why should not the ceremony take place at Lord Florimel's own mansion?"

"Simply because the world must not know that any of that extraordinary mystery and privacy has characterised the affair," returned the sable page. "When once it is all over and the necessity for that secrecy shall have ceased to exist, Lord Florimel may bear home his splendid bride; and the fact that they *are* married will be sufficient for society to learn, without suffering any of the contingent circumstances to transpire. Now do you comprehend the motives for pushing the observance of the darkest mystery up to the very last instant that such mystery is absolutely necessary to the circumstances in which the lady is placed?"

"I understand your explanations well enough," replied Mrs. Brace. "But how is it possible for Lord Florimel to espouse a lady without previously becoming acquainted with her name? The officiating clergyman must know it—it must likewise appear in the special license——"

"Not at all, madam," interrupted Rao. "A feigned name may be used for the purpose—and the marriage is not invalidated thereby. To-morrow morning I shall procure the license for Lord Florimel; and a portion of the services required at your hands is to secure the attendance of some clergyman who in consideration of a handsome fee will do what he is told without asking any questions."

"Yes—I am acquainted with a minister who will answer the purpose in all respects," said Mrs. Brace, after a few moments' reflection.

"Lord Florimel was certain that you would not be at a loss in this matter," remarked the sable youth. "And now, madam, if you will undertake to secure the attendance of a clergyman at nine o'clock to-morrow evening, the remainder of the assistance required at your hands is comparatively nothing: for all you will have to do is to place a suite of apartments in your *other* house at Lord Florimel's disposal—I mean in your establishment that looks upon Saint James's Square——"

"Ah! I see that his lordship has been tolerably explicit with you relative to my houses and so forth," observed Mrs. Brace, once more smiling with the archness and gaiety of happier times.

"Yes, madam—I know all about your establishment and yourself," said Rao: and the glance which he threw upon the milliner seemed to flash with the vividness of lightning. "But enough on that head," he instantaneously added. "I think that we now understand each other relative to the business——"

But Rao suddenly stopped short: for Mrs. Brace started nervously from her seat as a ring at the street-door bell met her ears.

"Excuse my absence for a few moments," she said, immediately recovering herself. "The servants are all gone to bed, and I must answer that summons——"

"Do not hurry yourself, madam, on my account," interrupted Rao.

Mrs. Brace smiled an acknowledgment of the youth's courtesy, and then hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER CCIV.

THE EAVES-DROPPER.

"How changed is this woman — how fearfully altered!" said the black page to himself, the instant that he was alone. "And how nervously she started when the tinkling of the bell reached her ears! Ah! crime—crime has done all this! Yes—it is clear as day-light: guilt has changed her thus—and guilt inspires her with sudden terrors! Care alone would be incapable of producing these effects upon the person and the mind of such a woman! Oh! if I could but penetrate into *her* secrets also and wreak a revenge as terrible as that which will soon overtake *him*——"

Then suddenly stopping short in his musings, Rao rose from his seat—glided noiselessly to the parlour-door—and listened with a breathless attention.

For it had struck him that he not only heard the footsteps of several persons traversing the passage outside, but likewise that the hissing of the word "Hush!" had mingled with the other sounds. And therefore was it that he had suddenly become an eaves-dropper; and he now distinctly heard Mrs. Brace say in a whispered tone of entreaty, "Come into this room—and for heaven's sake speak not until——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost to Rao's ear.

"Until you are all alone together and the door is carefully shut, I suppose?" he however said to himself, thus finishing in imagination the earnest appeal which the milliner had addressed to the persons whom she had just admitted into the house.

But Rao suddenly returned to his seat: for his ear had caught the rustle of a silk gown and the tread of footsteps approaching the parlour door. Nor was he mistaken: for the milliner almost immediately re-appeared;—and the rapid glance which the black page threw upon her, showed him that she was labouring under a profound agitation, despite of all her efforts to conceal it.

"My young friend," said Mrs. Brace, in a tone penetrated with the nervousness of mingled terror and vexation,—"a person has just stepped in upon some very important business—and I was thinking that if you could return in the morning——"

"Madam," interrupted the sable youth, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Transact your business—and I will cheerfully await your pleasure, even if it be an hour or two hours. But we *must* make our arrangements definitively this night, inasmuch as I shall be fully engaged to-morrow until the moment when my presence will be needed here."

"Then if you have no objection to wait a little," said Mrs. Brace, "I will rejoin you in as short a time as possible. Perhaps you will take some refreshment——"

"Nothing, I thank you, madam," said Rao. "This book, he added, as he took up a small volume of poems from a side-table, "will amuse me until you return."

Mrs. Brace accordingly withdrew once more: and the instant that she had quitted the room, Rao flung down the book and glided back to his post at the door.

"Ah! I know which apartment she has entered," he said to himself: "I can tell by the direction that her footsteps took. Oh! is not every nook and corner of this accursed dwelling as familiar to me as if

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I had been brought up in it from my infancy? But I will be bold—I will be adventurous at all risks and at any hazards: for there is something like a presentiment which prompts me to play the eaves-dropper this night."

And having thus hastily mused within himself, Rao opened the door so noiselessly that it emitted not even a sound which he could hear: and, stealthily traversing the passage, he approached the door of the apartment which he believed Mrs. Brace to have entered.

But we must now leave the sable page outside that room, while we narrate what is passing within it.

The Kinchin-Grand, Carrotty Poll, and the Gallows' Widow were really the persons whom Mrs. Brace had introduced thither: and we shall now behold her standing all ghastly and trembling in their presence—for she not only knew that they came for the purposes of extortion, but also that her very life was in their hands.

"Well, ma'am," said the Kinchin-Grand, the moment she returned to the apartment after arranging with Rao that he was to wait for her in the parlour,—"you see that these women here insisted on my keeping 'em company; and as I was raythor anxious to have a special introduction to a lady of your fashion and quality, I wasn't sorry to have sich an opportunity of paying my respects to you."

"What do you require of me?" asked Mrs. Brace, in a hollow tone, as she bent her troubled looks first upon Elizabeth Marks and then upon Carrotty Poll, without taking any notice of their male companion.

"I suppose, ma'am, that you can understand the nature of our business," said the Big Beggarman's daughter. "We are not accustomed to make calls of ceremony and leave our cards at gentlemen's or ladies' houses: but whenever and wherever we do pay visits, it is for a particular purpose."

"Did I not recompense you handsomely some time ago?" observed Mrs. Brace, now sinking upon a seat: "and had I not a right to suppose that you would leave me unmolested in future?"

"We won't argue the point," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly: "because it is not worth while. But we will at once explain the object of our visit."

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the milliner, hastily. "The sooner I know the worst the better. But remember that my death will do you no good——"

"Who the devil seeks your death, ma'am?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand. "For my part, I hope you'll live a thousand years——"

"Cease this jabbering, Bill," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, sternly. "We brought you with us as a protection—and not to play the part of a parrot."

"A protection?" observed Mrs. Brace. "And what made you think that you stood in need of a protection? Were you fearful that I should seek to injure you?"

"Well, madam," replied the Gallows' Widow, who hated the milliner with a rancorous bitterness, and who was therefore inwardly rejoiced at being enabled to give vent to words which she knew would cut the unhappy woman to the very soul,—"since you appear to seek an explanation on that head, I don't mind telling you that Poll Price and myself were somewhat afraid to venture here alone together any more. I mean, we thought it better and more prudent to bring our young friend with us: because there *have* been people who've come into this house, you know, and never gone out again. In fact, as I told you on the last occasion, it is no secret to us that Peter Grumley lies buried beneath the great flag-stone in the back-kitchen: and we've no doubt that his partner Mobbs, who disappeared so strangely and so suddenly, isn't very far off."

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched milliner, writhing convulsively upon her seat, while her countenance was hideous and ghastly with the most frightful workings of the features. "Wherefore recapitulate all this, young woman?"

"Because you wanted to know why me and Carrotty Poll were afraid to come alone into this house," replied the Gallows' Widow. "For it is a house of murder, madam—a house of mysterious midnight assassination—a house the very air of which fills even *me* with horror!"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed the milliner, covering her countenance with her hands. "Spare me—spare me, I beseech you—and tell me the business that has brought you hither now?"

"Well, give us your attention," observed the Gallows' Widow, her cold-blooded ferocity now sated with the amount of vengeance which her words had visibly inflicted upon the unhappy Mrs. Brace.

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed the latter: and the withdrawal of her hands from her face, revealed features so stamped with all the horrors of conscious guilt, and all the excruciations of a wretchedness which no additional calamity could possibly enhance, that she looked like the corpse of one who had met a violent death and on whose cheeks some hand had plastered the vivid rouge in mockery.

"You must know, ma'am," continued the Gallows' Widow, "that a certain person who bears the name of Warren, and who is not altogether a stranger to you, will be tried in a few days——"

"I know it—I know it," murmured Mrs. Brace: "I have read it all in the newspapers."

"And Mr. Stephen Price, this young woman's father," continued Elizabeth Marks, pointing to her female companion, "will be tried along with him. Well, we are certain that they won't be put to death—"

"How are you so sure of that," demanded the milliner in surprise, at the confidence with which the assertion was made.

"Oh! because we caught the Prince in a trap the other night," responded the Gallows' Widow; "and we compelled him to give us a written guarantee that the men's lives shall be saved. But they will be sentenced to transportation for the rest of their lives; and as me and Poll Price intend to follow them across the water, we thought it would be as well to carry out with us as much money as we can possibly rake together. So we resolved on paying you a last visit and taxing your generosity," added Elizabeth Marks, with a slight amount of irony, "for the last time."

"And how much do you require?" demanded Mrs. Brace, who had somewhat recovered her self-possession while the Gallows' Widow was giving the preceding explanations.

"We can't very well do with less than a thousand pounds," said the Gallows' Widow: "and if you will give us that sum, depend upon it you will never hear any more *from* us, whatever you may chance to hear *of* us."

"A thousand pounds!" repeated Mrs. Brace: then suddenly recollecting that Frederick Dray had more than half promised to accede to her proposal for emigration and that they might therefore leave England within a few days, she hoped to gain time by observing, "Well, I suppose I must comply with your demand: but when will you want the money?"

"Now—at once—down upon the nail—there's nothing like the prompt!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"I have not a thousand pounds in the house," said Mrs. Brace: "nor anything near that sum. It will take me at least a week to raise it."

"And in the meantime you'll perhaps be off to America," observed the Gallows' Widow.

"What—why—what made you think so?" stammered the milliner, all in a moment becoming dreadfully confused.

"Ah! then the random remark which I let drop, has struck home?" said Elizabeth Marks. "Mrs. Brace, we shall not leave this house until you have produced the thousand pounds!"

The whole of the preceding conversation had been overheard by Rao who was posted outside the door with his ear glued to the key-hole: but he now deemed it better to retire, inasmuch as matters appeared to be drawing to a crisis, and it was probable that the milliner would have to repair to some other room in order to procure the wherewith to satisfy her extortionate visitors. Rao accordingly beat a retreat to the parlour, where he resumed his seat and took up the volume which he had declared should engage his attention during Mrs. Brace's absence.

Scarcely had he thus settled himself, when the milliner re-appeared; and having apologised for

keeping him waiting so long, she opened a writing-desk—took something out of it—and then quitted the parlour once more, but with an intimation that she should return again in a few minutes. The sable page did not choose to follow her upon this occasion: he had no difficulty in understanding that, yielding to the threats of the extortioners, she had come to fetch the requisite amount from her desk to appease their rapacity;—and he had already gleaned *enough* to place the wretched woman completely in his power.

"I knew that she was tortured by a sense of guilt and its accompanying fears," said Rao to himself: "but such guilt as that—my God! such guilt—who would have expected it?"

And then, with his eyes still fixed upon the volume which he held in his hand, he fell into a profound reverie,—from which he was startled by the return of Mrs. Brace to the parlour.

"I have a thousand apologies to offer you, my young friend," she observed, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to divest of the accents of deep oppression that penetrated it: "but the person who called, and who is an excellent customer of mine," she added, with a sickly attempt at a smile, "kept me talking longer than I had expected."

"Well, madam," observed Rao, without turning his head, "I sincerely wish you a hundred of such customers—and I can assure you that I should not grow impatient while you were attending to them all."

"Thank you for your kindness," said Mrs. Brace: and as she returned to her seat, she endeavoured to conceal a sob under a short cough.

"Now, I think we have but little more to say to each other, after all," continued the black page. "You fully comprehend, madam, the services and the assistance that are required at your hands: namely, a complaisant parson who will ask no questions and even perform the marriage ceremony in the dark if needs be—and a suite of apartments in your *other* establishment."

"Your noble master shall be fully accommodated in every way," returned Mrs. Brace. "At nine o'clock to-morrow evening, all the arrangements shall be completed so far as I am concerned."

"Then I will not intrude longer upon your time, madam," said Rao, rising from his seat: "for it is already late."

The black page accordingly took his departure;—and the milliner was left alone to reflect upon all that had occurred during the last hour.

CHAPTER CCV.

PLANS AND INTRIGUES.

At about eight o'clock on the following evening Rao made his appearance again at Mrs. Brace's house; and this time he carried a large band-box in his hand. The milliner informed him that she had secured the services of a clergyman, who would be in attendance soon after nine; and Rao then requested her to conduct him to the suite of apartments which she had prepared for the reception of the bridal party. Mrs. Brace accordingly led the black page into the house which looked into St. James's Square; and escorting him through the saloons and bed-chambers upon the first and second floors, she told him that any or all of those apartments were at the service of Lord Florimel.

"Good!" observed Rao. "And now, madam, you will be kind enough to inform your domestics that they need not trouble themselves to answer any knock or ring at the front-door, as I will undertake that duty myself."

"Be it so," said Mrs. Brace. "And if you require my assistance for any purpose, you can come to me in the parlour where you have already seen me."

"Your services will be needed to give away the bride, madam," said Rao: "but I will fetch you at the proper moment—or else request the clergyman to do so. Perhaps you will hold yourself in readiness about half-past nine o'clock?"

"Certainly—with much pleasure," responded the milliner.

"One word more, madam," added Rao: then, in a solemn and mysterious tone, he said, "The ceremony will take place in *the dark*, for reasons which I cannot explain now. But I give you this warning, in order that you may not be taken by surprise."

"I am glad that you have mentioned the subject," observed Mrs. Brace, "for it otherwise would have produced a disagreeable impression on my mind."

The milliner then quitted Rao, who, the moment he was alone, proceeded to make a close inspection of the various apartments; and having selected those which he deemed most suitable, he took possession of a bed-chamber for his own accommodation. There he opened the band-box which he had brought with him: and taking out a white dress, a beautiful veil, and all the usual appurtenances to the complete apparel of a bride, he placed them carefully upon the bed. Then, surveying them with an indescribable earnestness, Rao murmured the monosyllables, "At last!"—and an expression of mingled triumph and ferocious vindictiveness swept over his countenance.

Scarcely had his features settled down into their natural placidity, when a double knock at the front-door echoed through the house; and the sable page hurried to answer the summons. The arrival was Lord Florimel, who came in a post-chaise which had brought him direct from Dover. He was unattended by any of his valets, having travelled alone in order that his movements might remain unknown and his proceedings unobserved by those whose prying curiosity he was so anxious to avoid. Rao lifted his lordship's portmanteau into the hall—paid the postilions and dismissed the vehicle—and then escorted his noble master to a bed-chamber.

"Are all the arrangements completed, Rao?" inquired the young nobleman, who was evidently labouring under much agitation and excitement mingled with a painful nervousness.

"All—everything, my lord," was the answer.

"Then hasten and assist me to dress, Rao," said Florimel. "The roads were dusty; and as the day was hot I was compelled to have the windows of the post-chaise open. Put me out clean linen and such apparel as becomes a bridegroom," he added, endeavouring to speak cheerfully: but the last words of his sentence were rendered tremulous with a sigh that rose from his breast and almost deepened into a sob.

"Does not your lordship feel well?" inquired

Rao, in a tone expressive of an affectionate sympathy.

"Yes—no—or rather I should say that I scarcely know how I *do* feel, my boy," answered the young nobleman. "It seems to me as if I were about to take a very desperate step: and now that the supreme moment draws near, I ask myself a thousand different questions in a minute—I am tortured by anxieties strangely blending with fond hopes and glowing thoughts of bliss——"

"But your lordship loves this lady whom you are about to espouse?" said Rao, looking from beneath his darkly fringed lids with a strange intentness at his noble master, though all the while affecting to be busied in arranging upon the bed the clean linen and other apparel which he was taking from the valise.

"I love her—yes, I love her—I have already told you so, boy, when I took you into my confidence," exclaimed Florimel, with all the pettishness of one who is agitated by a thousand conflicting ideas and antagonistic feelings. "And yet—and yet," he added in a more measured tone, "I could almost have wished that it were Pauline Clarendon to whom I am about to bind myself for ever! You are certain, boy," cried the nobleman, turning with feverish abruptness towards the sable page, "that the intelligence you gave me relative to Pauline was correct?"

"I merely told your lordship what I had read in a newspaper ten days ago, when you sent me up to London from Dover in order to transact a little business for your lordship," said Rao. "On rejoining your lordship again at Dover, I deemed it my duty to inform you that I had read of Miss Clarendon's marriage in the paper——"

"Ah! enough—enough!" ejaculated Florimel, in a tone of bitterness. "I deserved to lose her! Yes—I deserved it! Nevertheless, had she remained single—had she continued to love me—and had I been assured that it was only necessary for us to meet in order to be reconciled, I do not think that my Unknown would have sustained her empire over me. But it is done—Pauline is another's," added the young nobleman, in a low musing tone: "and I may as well save my peerage and my fortune by giving my hand to this mysterious being who promises to raise me above all the perils and all the difficulties which now environ me."

Rao fixed his eyes intently upon his noble master as he thus mused in an audible tone; and again did that singular expression of triumph and vindictiveness sweep rapidly over the features of the sable page. 'Twas but as the shadow which the wing of a bird might throw in its flight—as transitory and as evanescent:—and that countenance resumed its placidity again!

Another double knock now echoed through the house:—and Florimel started nervously as he exclaimed, "'Tis she!"

Rao instantaneously quitted the room and descended the stairs to open the street door. The Unknown, closely veiled, alighted from a hackney-coach, which immediately drove away. She too came unattended and alone; and in her hand she carried a large band-box, which Rao took from her and bore into the hall. Then, without saying a single word, he conducted her up stairs to a chamber, on the threshold of which he paused.

"If you require female attendance, madam," he said, "Mrs. Brace—the mistress of the house—will cheerfully wait upon you."

"No—I can manage by myself, Rao," returned the lady, in that musical voice which was endowed with such syren charms: and, taking the band-box from the sable page, she closed the door of the apartment.

Rao now returned to his master, who inquired anxiously if it were the Unknown that had just arrived. The response was of course in the affirmative;—and Lord Florimel heaved a profound sigh, but said nothing more.

In about twenty minutes his toilette was completed; and Rao then conducted him to the saloon where the ceremony was to take place.

"You have procured the special license, boy?" said Florimel, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

"Here it is, my lord," answered the page, drawing the paper from his pocket.

"What name have you had filled in for the bride?" demanded the nobleman.

"Some fictitious one, of course, as I did not know the real one, my lord," replied Rao: "I gave the first that came into my head—but I really forget what it was at this moment——"

The page was interrupted by another knock at the front door: and thrusting back the special license into his pocket, he hastened to answer this third summons. But as he descended the stairs, he said to himself, "The interruption was fortunate—and now by a little good management I shall avoid any farther questioning relative to this license."

Upon opening the front door, Rao beheld an elderly man whose clerical style of dress at once convinced him that this was the accommodating parson mentioned by Mrs. Brace. A certain sanctimoniousness of look and a rubicund countenance denoted the admixture of hypocrisy and dissipation which constituted the character of the man; and Rao perceived at a glance that he was in every way a suitable instrument for his purposes.

"One word with you, reverend sir," whispered the youth, as he led the clergyman into a parlour opening from the hall: then, closing the door of the room, he said, "Will you favour me with your name?"

"Tobias Colwell," was the response: "Tobias Colwell, at the service of whomsoever I have been invited hither to aid or assist——"

"Well, reverend sir," interrupted Rao, "I presume that Mrs. Brace has already given you some idea of the nature of the business for which your presence is needed?"

"To perform the marriage ceremony for a noble lord and some lady whom he loves—is it not so?" said Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Precisely," answered Rao. "And you must be pleased to look upon me as the master of the ceremonies, having full power to regulate the same. As a proof of this, I beg to tender your reverence a fee, which shall be doubled if you implicitly and accurately follow out the instructions which I am about to give you:"—and the sable youth counted twenty sovereigns into the parson's hand.

"You can command my services in any way," observed Mr. Colwell, his rubicund countenance growing brighter than even the gold that he fingered with such ineffable pleasure. "Be it a

marriage—a baptism—a burial—a christening—or a churching, it is all the same: I am your man!"

"I was sure of it," exclaimed Rao. "And now take this special license," he continued, producing the paper. "You will see that Lord Florimel is one of the parties, and a lady whose name is also given is the other. But you must avoid any mention of the lady's name until *after* the knot shall have been indissolubly tied; and should it be necessary to breathe that name *during* any portion of the ceremony, you must slur over it in such a manner that it may not meet Lord Florimel's ears. Do you comprehend me? and will you act precisely as I require?"

"*Yes*, to both questions," answered Mr. Colwell. "Anything else?"

"I see that we shall have no difficulty in coming to an understanding with each other," observed Rao. "There is one point more—which is, *that the ceremony must take place in the dark?*"

"I have no objection," replied the reverend gentleman, who did not forget the additional fee which had been promised: "and as for the prayers, I can repeat them as well without a book as with one."

"Good!" exclaimed Rao: "and now please to attend to one more point upon which I must instruct you. Mrs. Brace has undertaken to give the bride away: but her presence is not needed until everything is in readiness for the ceremony to commence. Therefore the moment the bride enters the apartment whither you will be shortly led, you must hasten and fetch Mrs. Brace. She is already aware that the proceedings will be conducted in the mystery and depth of utter darkness; and hence there is no necessity for any farther explanation on that head. Do you comprehend me?"

"It is impossible to mistake instructions so precise and intelligible," said the parson. "But assuredly this is the most mysterious affair——"

"Are you afraid of it? Do you wish to retreat?" demanded Rao, impatiently.

"What! with twenty guineas in hand, and twenty more in prospective," exclaimed Mr. Colwell. "Not I!"

"Well and good!" said Rao, in a tone of satisfaction. "And now I must request you, reverend sir, to be pleased to remain here for a few minutes. There is wine upon the side-board."

"I see it," interrupted the clergyman, his mouth watering; "and I know that Mrs. Brace's wine is excellent. You need not, therefore, be in any hurry—as with that bottle of Port I can manage to while away half-an-hour or so agreeably enough."

Rao now quitted the parson, and hastened back to his noble master in the drawing-room.

"The clergyman is come, my lord," said the page. "But I am instructed to convey to you an earnest prayer from the unknown lady who is about to become your lordship's bride. It is the last scene in the drama of mystery which now approaches its *denouêment*."

"Whatever be the lady's request, I shall of course agree to it," returned Lord Florimel.

"The bridal veil, my lord," continued Rao, "will not conceal that countenance which must be hidden until the nuptial knot shall have been tied; and, therefore, the Unknown solicits your lordship to allow the ceremony to take place in the dark. I have spoken to the clergyman upon the subject, and he is agreeable."

"Then I can assuredly offer no objection," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "But, Oh! how happy shall I be when all this mystery is at an end. What can it mean?—what purpose can it serve?"

"I think that I can guess, my lord," said Rao, in a deliberative tone. "The lady's vanity will be flattered by the circumstance that her winning manners, the charms of her conversation, and all the myriad blandishments which she has brought to bear upon your lordship's heart, should have succeeded in maintaining their empire until the very last, without the necessity of revealing to your lordship her countenance, her name, and her rank: and then she will experience all the exultation of a woman's pride in displaying to your lordship's eyes a glory of beauty such as even in your fondest hopes and your brightest dreams your imagination has never pictured."

"Think you, Rao, that these are her motives?" demanded Florimel, every vein tingling with the fervour thus excited in his whole being.

"I am sure of it my lord," returned the sable youth. "And I must inform your lordship that I just now caught a glimpse of the lady's countenance as she opened her chamber-door and stopped me as I was passing——"

"Oh! is it possible that you have seen her face, Rao?" exclaimed the young nobleman, in a perfect enthusiasm of joyous expectation, mingled with a delicious suspense.

"Yes, my lord," replied the youth. "The veil caught in the latch and was drawn aside for a moment——"

"And is she really so very, very beautiful?" demanded Gabriel, in a tone of feverish impatience, which was however of no unpleasurable nature.

"The world has never before seen such charms, my lord," responded the page. "I was struck with wonder and amazement at the splendour of that glorious beauty of which I obtained so brief a glimpse. Ah! my lord, you will be well rewarded for your blind devotion to that superb creature!"

"Rao, you have ravished me—you have enchanted all my senses—you have steeped me in a fount of ecstatic bliss!" cried the young nobleman, in a voice full of enthusiastic fervour. "Oh! hasten and let the ceremony proceed—and assure my beauteous Unknown that she has but to dictate her will in all things, to render me her willing slave."

"Then I shall extinguish the lights, my lord," said Rao; "and your lordship must consent to remain in darkness until the lady shall have completed her bridal toilette."

"Do so—do whatever you choose—whatever *she* ordains, Rao!" exclaimed the infatuated nobleman, rendered almost delirious with the ardour of hope and the sense of indescribable bliss.

The black page accordingly put out the candles; and the room was involved in total darkness.

"I shall now introduce the minister, my lord," observed Rao.

Thus speaking he quitted the apartment and returned to the parlour where he had left Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Now, reverend sir," he said, "you will have the goodness to follow me to the apartment where the ceremony is to take place. Lord Florimel is

there—and the lights are already extinguished. Should his lordship say a word to you relative to the marriage-license, you will have the kindness to answer that you have it in your pocket—but by no means mention the lady's name figuring therein."

"I shall fulfil your instructions with all due fidelity," returned the reverend gentleman.

Rao then proceeded to escort him to the apartment where Lord Florimel was waiting with such thrilling impatience and ecstatic hope; and having thus far perfected his arrangements and combined his plans, the sable page repaired to the chamber of the Unknown.

CHAPTER CCVI.

THE RIVAL.

Rao knocked gently, but in a determined manner; and the mysterious lady, opening the door to a little distance, but remaining concealed behind it, said, "Is that you, boy?"

"It is, madam," was the reply: "and I must speak to you immediately."

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" demanded the Unknown, in an agitated and nervous voice.

"No, madam—nothing new, at all events," responded Rao. "But you will permit me to enter, as it is of the utmost importance I should have a few words with you."

"But I am not half dressed, Rao," said the lady, in a tremulous whisper.

"It matters not, madam," was the resolute rejoinder: "my business admits of no delay."

"Wait one instant, then," answered the Unknown: and she closed the door.

In about a minute she opened it again; and Rao passed into the chamber, carefully shutting the door behind him.

The Unknown, who had now nearly completed her toilette, appeared before him closely veiled and with a shawl thrown negligently over her shoulders, but scarcely concealing the full and swelling globes which gave such rich luxuriance to her splendid bust.

"Now, madam," said Rao, speaking with an accent of firm decision and casting upon the lady a look that seemed to penetrate her veil and which carried a troubled sensation into the very inmost recesses of her soul,—"we have not many minutes to converse, and not a moment to waste in expostulation, recrimination, or explanation."

"What mean you, good youth?" asked the Unknow, her musical voice vibrating like the chord of a harp during the few moments that follow immediately after the player's finger has been withdrawn.

"I mean, madam," replied Rao, his looks becoming more and more mysteriously alarming, "that I am here to dictate certain terms, and to prove to you that I have the power of enforcing obedience."

"Ah! is it possible that you meditate treachery, Rao?" exclaimed the Unknown, now trembling visibly from head to foot, and clasping her fair hands entreatingly.

"I am about to behold the consummation of the plans which I have cherished for weeks past, and for which your conduct towards Lord Florimel not only furnished the idea but also the means of carrying it into execution. Madam," added Rao, in a voice of mingled solemnity and imperiousness, "you must abandon all hope of espousing him whom you love so madly—so passionately—so insanely!"

"My God! abandon the only hope of happiness!" cried the lady, in a voice of bitter lamentation. "No—no: it cannot be, Rao—it cannot be! You are jesting—you would not be so cruel! Besides, by what right do you interfere?—and what power do you presume to exercise over me?"

"My right, madam, is that of vengeance," was the response, deeply accentuated; "and my power consists in knowing who you are and being able to tear away the veil that conceals your lascivious life beneath the imposture of a tremendous hypocrisy!"

"O God! is it possible?" murmured the lady, sinking down upon a chair in a state of utter annihilation.

"And now, madam," continued the implacable Rao, "you will have the kindness to remain a prisoner in this room until after the ceremony, when you will be at liberty to depart. And as for your secret—I promise that it shall be safe, even with regard to Lord Florimel himself."

"The ceremony, you say?" exclaimed the Unknown, springing wildly from her seat—and Rao could observe the rapid heavings and fallings of the lady's bosom. "But how is the ceremony to take place, if I am excluded?—is there a rival—has Pauline Clarendon regained her influence——"

"There is a rival, madam—but it is not she whose name you have just mentioned," answered Rao.

"Then who is she, boy?" demanded the Unknown, fearfully excited with a thousand maddening, conflicting, wildering emotions and ideas. "Speak!—who is she?"

"I!" ejaculated the page: and tearing open the closely buttoned frock coat at the same instant, the mysterious being revealed the white bosom of a female.

"Heavens! what does this mean?" cried the Unknown, amazement now absorbing all other feelings. "Who are you?—wherefore this disguise?—why that dark hue upon the face and hands?"

"The tale is too long to tell, even if I were inclined to narrate it," said the young woman. "Suffice it for me to observe that in becoming the wife of Lord Florimel, as I assuredly shall within the next half-hour, I am but wreaking a long cherished vengeance."

"This is horrible—detestable—and shall not be!" exclaimed the Unknown, with accents of desperation. "Whatever be the risk——"

"You will not run it!" cried Rao. "Hark, madam—a word in your ear! Let me tell you who you are——"

And the disguised female, whom we must still call Rao for the present, whispered something in a low tone.

"Yes—yes—you know me!" exclaimed the syren-charmer, in a voice of bitter vexation and her whole form trembling with rage and disappointment. "But I defy your threats—I defy you to prove aught of that lascivious life to which you alluded! Woman, whoever you may be—I accept

you as a rival—and again do I defy you!" added the Unknown, goaded to desperation.

"Ah! madam—or rather, my lady," said Rao, in a voice of mingled sardonism and triumph, "you will not repeat your defiance, when I tell you that the boudoir of love, of darkness, and of mystery is no secret to me! For I have been there—yes, been there, when you clasped the infatuated young nobleman in your arms and made him the partner of your frantic pleasures."

"No—no—'tis false!—'tis an invention—a calumny—a foul calumny on your part!" cried the Unknown, quivering with emotions of terrible rage, and maddening shame, and burning hatred.

"'Tis true, my lady—'tis true!" cried Rao: then drawing forth something from her pocket, the disguised female said, "This piece of drapery matches with that in the boudoir of love and mystery!"

"Ah! I am ruined—I am crushed—I am undone!" moaned the wretched woman whose secret deeds had thus so unaccountably come to the knowledge of a stranger. "But you will not expose me—you will not hold me up to the shame, and scorn, and indignation of the world——"

"No: such is not my intention—nor does it in any way suit my interests to injure you by such means," replied Rao. "Your ladyship may rest assured and tranquillise yourself on that head! But my time is precious: and I have only now to ask whether your ladyship will remain quietly here until I choose to release you?"

"There is no alternative," murmured the wretched Unknown, falling upon a seat and wringing her hands in all the bitterness of an indescribable anguish.

But Rao, remorseless and implacable, heeded not her grief; and hastening from the room, the mysterious being closed and locked the door, taking the key away with her.

She then hurried to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use;—and taking a small phial from her pocket, she poured its contents into a basin of water. Then stripping off her page's raiment, she washed her face, neck, and hands with the water containing the chemical fluid;—and the flesh which was previously of a sable dye, became white—or rather of a natural brunette complexion. Pure, clear, and beautiful was this complexion now;—and upon the cheeks was enough of the carnation's tint to enhance the charming aspect of the lovely being who had so long concealed her European fairness beneath the artificial semblance of an oriental skin.

And now, having cast a look of mingled joy and triumph into the mirror which reflected the lovely countenance of the brunette, she proceeded with marvellous haste to don the bridal raiment that she had prepared. The hair, of such silken fineness, was speedily arranged in the manner becoming her sex: then silk stockings and satin shoes displaced the boots that had hitherto imprisoned the well-shaped legs and concealed the admirable symmetry of the ankles;—and when she had put on the white nuptial robe, she placed a wreath of white roses on her hair and threw the snowy veil over her head.

Never was marriage-toilette performed with such expedition—and yet not a sign of this precipitation was visible in her appearance when the process was completed. Charming she was—and charming she looked,—save, perhaps, that there was a slight air of masculine decision and amazonian firmness in her looks, which somewhat marred the soft sensibility and winning grace peculiar to her sex.

And now, with rapid footsteps she glided along the passage to the stairs, which she descended with equal speed; and, after pausing for a moment at the door of the saloon, as if to summon all her presence of mind and courage for the final scene, she passed into the room.

The interior was pitch dark: but the rustling of her dress following immediately upon the opening and shutting of the door, made Florimel aware of the presence of *the bride*—and he hurried to meet her. Their hands met—and he retained her's in his grasp, as he whispered in a tone of profound tenderness, "A few minutes more, and you will be mine!"

"Yes, my well-beloved Gabriel," she murmured, in a voice so low that he could not possibly observe in it anything different from that of the Unknown.

"Now, reverend sir," exclaimed Gabriel, leading his fair companion towards the vicinage of the table, where he had previously noticed that footstools were placed: "be pleased to hasten and fetch Mrs. Brace, since you have told me that she has consented to bestow my bride upon me."

But the clergyman, in pursuance of the instructions so precisely given to him by Rao, was already hurrying to leave the room as Florimel thus spoke: and the nobleman was now left alone with her who had so strangely and adventurously usurped the place of the syren-charmer.

The circumstances in which Rao now found herself suddenly placed, were awkward to a degree. She had nevertheless foreseen them, and was prepared how to act: for dangerous as her position now was, and immense as she knew the risk of detection now to be, it was impossible for her to have avoided this dilemma by any other mode of directing the progress of her deeply-ramified intrigue.

But of what nature was the peril which now menaced her with discovery and the consequent explosion of her scheme? The reader will remember that the Unknown was tall and endowed with charms voluptuously luxuriant and full—whereas Rao was short in stature and slightly formed. If, then, Lord Florimel should seize her in his arms or otherwise attempt to caress her during the temporary absence of the clergyman, he could scarcely help discovering the cheat that was being practised upon him. Nor was this all: for should Rao be compelled to speak at any great length, there was the additional chance of her voice betraying the fact that she was *not* the syren-unknown.

Therefore, the instant that the clergyman had quitted the room, Rao said in a hasty whisper, "I have forgotten something: excuse me one moment, dearest Gabriel!"—and, abandoning his hand, she sped to the door. This she opened—made her dress rustle, as if she were passing out—and then closed the door again. But she did not leave the apartment at all: on the contrary, she stood motionless and breathless as a statue in the close vicinage of that door.

"Adorable creature!" exclaimed Florimel, the instant he fancied that he was alone: "how ardently I long to gaze upon that countenance which

Rao assures me is so gloriously handsome! But I was always convinced that thou art of a rare beauty: I never doubted that thy features were as faultless as thy form is superb! And now—oh! now the moment approaches for elucidating all that is dark and mysterious in thee! I shall behold thy countenance and learn thy name: thy rank and position will be revealed to me—and from all thou hast at different times told me, I need not fear that the alliance will be one for which I shall have to blush. Oh! what an empire hast thou gained over my heart—inscrutable, incomprehensible! Thou more than woman—thou goddess of a myriad fascinations—who canst thou be? and whence dost thou derive the power of saving my peerage and my fortunes from the grasp of the claimant that has sprung up? But in a few minutes I shall know all this;—and there is an elysian ecstacy in the very suspense that I now feel—a blissful charm in the uncertainty that envelopes me as profoundly as does the darkness of this room."

Thus mused aloud the enthusiastic and infatuated young nobleman, until the door suddenly opened and the clergyman re-entered, escorting Mrs. Brace. Almost immediately afterwards Rao opened the door again—made her muslin robe rustle—and then closed the door promptly,—so that the effect produced was really just the same as if she had actually returned to the apartment.

Again was Lord Florimel by her side in a moment—and again was her hand locked in his own. With hasty steps they felt their way back to the vicinage of the table, where they knelt down upon the foot-stools.

The ceremony then commenced immediately: and there—in the midst of the utter darkness which prevailed—did the accommodating clergyman begin to recite the service for this most strange, most mysterious, and most romantic marriage.

CHAPTER CCVII.

THE INVALID.

We must now return to Frederick Dray, who, as the reader will recollect, was labouring under a severe indisposition when he retired to rest on the preceding night. He had slept with his wonted soundness until a late hour in the morning; and his first feelings, on awaking, were such as to induce him to believe that his illness had passed away. He however resolved to take his breakfast in bed; and Mrs. Brace accordingly carried it up to him as soon as she had prepared it.

But the moment he placed the tea-cup to his lips, he experienced such a sudden nausea and sickness at the stomach, attended by an equally abrupt access of head-ache, that he was compelled to decline taking any refreshment; and imagining that he had either eaten something which had disagreed with him, or that it was a bilious attack under which he was suffering, he consented to allow the milliner to procure some medicine. This he took; and he likewise determined to remain in bed the whole day.

The milliner duly recounted to him all that had occurred on the previous evening,—how the extortioners had paid another visit to her house and compelled her to give them a thousand pounds—and how Lord Florimel's page had called for the purpose of making those arrangements with which the reader is already acquainted, and which Mrs. Brace succinctly explained to her paramour. The visit of the Kinchin-Grand and his two female companions irritated and annoyed Frederick Dray to a much greater degree than the purpose of Rao's call pleased him on the other hand—inasmuch as the latter business did not promise to be so productive as the former one had proved detrimental to the state of the milliner's finances. His vexation was therefore only mitigated and not altogether appeased by the Florimel-affair;—and throughout the day he continued to toss about uneasily in his bed, a prey to a mental irritability which appeared to aggravate his physical indisposition. Towards evening, however, he grew somewhat more calm, and at length sank off into a profound slumber—a circumstance which permitted Mrs. Brace ample leisure to make the arrangements agreed upon between herself and Rao.

When Frederick Dray awoke again, he found a light burning on a table by his bed-side. He called for the milliner: but no one answered him. He raised himself in the couch—and fell back on the pillow, under the influence of the most torturing sensations. The nausea in the stomach was now intolerable to a degree—his head ached with a positive violence—and a general feeling of uneasiness pervaded his whole system. He experienced a burning thirst; and, reaching out his hand, he filled a tumbler with toast-and-water which had been placed upon the night-table. But so dreadfully did his heart appear to heave against the cooling beverage, that scarcely had he placed it to his lips when an irresistible impulse prompted him to fling away the glass from his hand, as if a sudden spasm had shaken his arm with a violent convulsion.

"What the deuce can be the matter with me?" he murmured in a ferocious tone to himself, shuddering all over at the same time, though without knowing why—and indeed without as yet entertaining the slightest suspicion of the awful truth.

The thirst which he experienced was now intolerable: but he loathed the idea of making another attempt to stay it with the toast-and-water. It struck him that some tea would now do him good: and he likewise fancied that he ought to take a little sustenance. For he had eaten nothing the entire day;—and he reasoned himself into the belief that the nausea which he felt at the stomach was nothing more than faintness for want of food.

He called out again for the milliner: but no answer was returned. He reached the bell-rope—and it happened that the impatient jerk which he gave the cord, detached it from the wire without ringing the bell.

"Perdition!" he exclaimed, now actually foaming at the mouth with rage. "Am I to be left here to perish like a dog?"

Then all in a moment the thought flashed to his mind that Mrs. Brace, taking advantage of his illness, had abandoned him and fled from the metropolis.

"Yes—by heaven! it must be so," he cried

aloud, in a savage tone, and with a sort of subdued howl like that of a wild beast. "She has long had a hankering to bolt to America—and I remember that last night she talked a good deal about it. Perhaps, after all, those stories concerning the Gallows' Widow's party and the visit of Lord Florimel's page, were only pure inventions—damnable lies, in fact—to throw me the more completely off my guard and make me think that in the first place her finances were utterly beggared, and in the second place that she had plenty of business on hand at the moment to occupy her attention. Yes—yes—I see it all! The wretch has bolted! And who knows," added Frederick Dray, another strong spasm shaking his entire form with convulsive violence, "that she has not poisoned me? By heaven! I feel as if I was poisoned. This nausea—this head-ache—these uneasy sensations——Oh! the vile woman, she has poisoned me!"

Then, after arriving at this horrible conclusion, the unhappy man lay motionless and silent for several minutes, pondering on the presumed treachery of his paramour and what he believed to be his own hopeless condition. But suddenly raising himself up in the bed, he resolved, if possible, to ascertain the worst;—and staggering forth from the couch, he with pain and difficulty drew on some clothing. Then, enveloping himself in a dressing-gown, he took the light in his hand and quitted the room.

Sustaining himself by the ballusters, he slowly descended the stairs, his feet appearing to be as heavy as lead and all his veins tingling with uneasy sensations. The nausea at the stomach still continued; and the violence of the head-ache was unabated. Several times he thought he must sink down on the steps, or fall headlong: but he clung to the railings with one hand while he held the candle in the other;—and in this manner he at

length succeeded in gaining the bottom of the stairs.

Entering the parlour where Mrs. Brace was accustomed to sit, he found the wax candles burning upon the table—her work-box open—and a glass with some wine in it standing near. His fears that she had abandoned the house were therefore dissipated in a moment;—but the impression that she had poisoned him still remained fixed upon his mind.

Ringing the bell furiously, he asked the servant who responded to the summons where the milliner was. The domestic replied that Mrs. Brace had passed only a minute or two previously into the adjoining house.

"Very well. You may retire!" exclaimed Frederick savagely: and as soon as the servant had hurried off, amazed and frightened at the invalid's brutal manner and ghastly appearance, Dray muttered to himself, "Ill seek her out and accuse her of poisoning me, though all the lords and bridal parties in the universe have met together this night beneath our roof."

And half maddened with the most torturing sensations of mind and body, the wretched man proceeded as quickly as he was able into the more private part of the spacious establishment. The hall was deserted—the usual attendant there having been relieved from his post on the present occasion in pursuance of the instructions given by Rao to Mrs. Brace: and without encountering a soul, did Frederick Dray drag himself up the handsome staircase.

On reaching the landing he made straight for the best drawing-room, where he expected to find Mrs. Brace and the bridal-party;—and it was just after the commencement of the marriage ceremony, as described at the close of the preceding chapter, that the door was suddenly burst open—a light streamed into the saloon, until that moment involved in such utter darkness—and the ghastly form of Frederick Dray, enveloped in the dressing gown, appeared upon the threshold.

A shriek burst from the lips of the bride—an ejaculation of anger from those of the bridegroom: the parson stopped short—and Mrs. Brace was struck speechless and motionless with dismay, her eyes fixed on the spectral-like form of her paramour.

But at the next moment a louder and wilder exclamation thrilled from the tongue of Lord Florimel, as his looks fell upon the person of the bride. For he saw at a glance that it was not his Unknown,—that she was shorter and thinner;—and tearing away the veil from her countenance, he started back in mingled amazement and affright as he instantaneously recognized the countenance of Caroline Walters!

It is impossible to describe the scene of confusion which followed. Mrs. Brace, who was likewise struck by this sudden revelation of the features of the young woman, was seized with a panic terror; and, throwing herself upon a sofa, she fainted. The Reverend Tobias Colwell, fearing that Lord Florimel had discovered some treachery and fancying that he should be punished as an accomplice, stole away from the room and beat a hurried retreat;—while Frederick Dray advanced into the apartment, holding the candle in his hand, and flinging wildly inquiring looks upon the milliner, the nobleman, and Caroline Walters.

"Good heavens! I comprehend it all!" cried the enraged Florimel, seizing the young woman violently by the wrist. "Fool that I have been!—dolt, idiot, maniac—not to have seen through the cheat ere now! Ah! and was it thus to ensnare me into a marriage with you, Caroline, that you assumed the guise of a black page?—and was that mysterious Unknown nothing more nor less than your accomplice?—or was it some deeper vengeance still which you meditated? Speak—tell me—confess everything! But, Ah! a thought strikes me," he exclaimed, his whole form quivering with the fury that filled his breast. "My papers—my documents—my valuable title-deeds—'twas you who stole them!"

"And if I took a few paltry sheets of parchment from you, my lord," said Caroline, in a cold, contemptuous tone, as she fixed her dark eyes intently upon him, "what was that theft in comparison with the foul robbery which you perpetrated in regard to me?"

"A robbery in regard to you!" cried Florimel, with blended amazement and indignation.

"Yes—you robbed me of my honour and of my happiness, my lord," returned Caroline: "you filched away my heart and trampled it under foot! You won my love and made it a curse to me instead of a blessing! Ah! my lord, you have been guilty of a flagrant infamy towards one who would have died for you: but I will yet be terribly avenged!"

And as these words fell from her lips, she turned away so suddenly and sped from the room with such a spirit-like celerity, that the door closed behind her ere Florimel had even time to advance a pace in pursuit or extend an arm to hold her back. He rushed after her: but as his fingers touched the handle of the door, he heard the key turning in the lock—and he found that he was a prisoner!

What could this mean? what aim had Caroline Walters now in view?—what further treachery was she meditating? These questions, rapid as thought alone can be, suggested themselves in a moment: but the answers were beyond all power of conjecture. Florimel stamped his foot with rage;—and turning away from the door, he beheld Mrs. Brace gasping with the pain of returning consciousness as she lay stretched upon the sofa, while Frederick Dray, still holding the candle in his hand, was contemplating her with an expression of such intense hatred and savage ferocity that the young nobleman gave utterance to an ejaculation of mingled affright and horror.

Frederick started at the cry,—started as if he had forgotten the presence of a third person altogether and was only that instant reminded of the fact: then, as his features became all in a moment convulsed with terrible and ghastly workings, he dropped the light—the room suddenly became involved in total darkness—and a hideous growling like that of a dog fell horribly upon the ears of the young nobleman and Mrs. Brace.

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In the meantime Caroline Walters, having locked the door of the saloon in the manner already described, hastened with lightning-speed to the chamber where she had made the Unknown a

captive. Opening the door, she burst in, exclaiming, "Fly, my lady—fly! if you wish to escape detection!"

"What has occurred? and what peril threatens me?" demanded the mysterious syren-charmer, who had resumed the apparel which she wore when arriving in the hackney-coach. "Oh! you have not been base enough to betray me?"

"No—no!" ejaculated Caroline, impatiently. "But my plot has failed—failed at the very instant of success! Another moment and I should have been his wife! At a future time, however, I will explain all this—but for the present let me conjure you to fly if you wish to escape discovery and exposure!"

"Thanks, young woman, for your advice," said the Unknown: and without tarrying an instant to exchange another word, or even to take the bandbox in which she had replaced the bridal dress that was not needed after all, she fled precipitately down stairs and rushed from the house.

Having thus frightened the Unknown away, so as to prevent her from meeting Lord Florimel again, at least for the present, Caroline Walters sped to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use; and, stripping off the wedding-dress—literally tearing it in pieces from her person, in her impatience to be gone—she resumed the page's livery. But she had no time to colour her face and hands again with the sable dye, even if such a process were any longer deemed necessary: and, congratulating herself on having been able to change her apparel ere the prisoners broke loose from the saloon in which she had confined them, she took her hurried departure.

CHAPTER CCVIII.

A FRIGHTFUL TRAGEDY.

MEANTIME a horrible scene was occurring in the room where Florimel, Mrs. Brace, and Frederick Dray had remained together. For immediately upon the extinguishing of the candle as it fell on the carpet, a hideous sound, resembling the savage growling and barking of a dog, burst from the throat of Frederick Dray;—and throwing himself upon the floor, he began to rage, and toss, and writhe in fearful convulsions.

"Who is the man? and what is the matter with him?" cried Lord Florimel, horror-stricken at the dreadful scene which was thus taking place in the dark, and yet feeling ashamed to suffer the milliner to suspect that he was really alarmed.

"O God! what ails him? He has gone mad—raving mad!" exclaimed the miserable woman, not heeding the young nobleman's queries: and, groping her way to the bell-pull, she plucked at it with such violence that it snapped asunder.

"You have broken the cord?" cried Florimel, feverishly anxious to escape from a position which was by no means agreeable, and from a scene the horrors of which were aggravated by the darkness.

"Yes—but I have found the other," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, as she pulled the second bell with a little more caution. "O heavens! what is the matter with Frederick? He is mad—he is mad—and he will betray all our secrets in his delirious ravings!"

"In good faith," said Florimel, now somewhat recovering his composure as the first effect of the sudden tremor was passing away,—"I care but little what the fellow can reveal, so far as I am concerned. But it seems to me, madam, that you must have been a party to the trick which was ere now so recently carried to a successful issue in regard to myself?"

"No, no—my lord—I protest that I am innocent in that respect," exclaimed the wretched milliner. "O horror! how he raves—how he writhes—how terribly he is convulsed!—But you must not accuse me, Florimel—you must not accuse me of treachery towards you. I was deceived as well as yourself——"

"I would rather think so, after all our former friendship," interrupted the nobleman. "But in God's name ring the bell again—or I will endeavour to burst open the door——"

At that instant footsteps were heard hastily ascending the stairs—the door was thrown open—and a couple of the milliner's servants burst into the room. They had been alarmed by the violent pealing of the bell which rang down in the kitchen; and hence the coming of two footmen at the same time to answer the summons.

Lights were speedily procured—and then the appalling condition of Frederick Dray confirmed all the horrible ideas which the nobleman and Mrs. Brace had previously conceived of the agonizing nature of the throes that were convulsing him. His eyes glistened with an unnatural lustre—his countenance was ghastly—his features were distorted—all the muscles of his throat seemed painfully distended—and strong spasms, shooting every instant through his entire form, made him writhe, and tremble, and shudder in awful agonies.

"This spectacle is more than I can endure," exclaimed Florimel, dreadfully shocked and profoundly alarmed at a sight which he could not understand: and, hastening from the room, he quitted the house.

Mrs. Brace scarcely noticed his abrupt departure, so fevered was her impatience to get Dray removed at once to a bed-chamber in order that she might dismiss the footmen from further attendance on the occasion. For when that paroxysm of anguished gaspings and spasmodic convulsions in the throat, subsided for a few moments at intervals, the wretched sufferer gave vent to the wildest language and the most insane ravings, mingled with sounds that resembled the barking of a dog: and Mrs. Brace was tortured with excruciating apprehensions lest in his delirious outpourings he should betray the tremendous secret of the murders that the flag-stone in the back kitchen had hitherto so well concealed!

She accordingly hurried the footmen to raise the demoniac—for such he indeed appeared—from the carpet whereon he lay writhing in awful convulsions;—and with much difficulty did they carry him to the nearest bed-chamber. There Mrs. Brace bade them leave him to her charge, as she would take the necessary care of him: but as she gave no instructions relative to the propriety of obtaining medical assistance, one of the footmen inquired whether he should not do well to fetch the doctor. The milliner dared not reply in the negative to such a demand and under such circumstances: the response was accordingly given in the

affirmative—and the two lacqueys left her alone with her rabid paramour.

He now became somewhat more tranquil; so that she was enabled to divest him of his apparel and get him into bed. Then, as a burning thirst seemed to be oppressing him, she filled a tumbler with water and presented it to his lips. But, with a hideous yell and with an awful convulsing of the whole frame, he recoiled from the mere sight of the limpid beverage; and the next moment, in a sudden paroxysm of fury, he dashed the glass from the milliner's hand.

The spectacle which the wretched sufferer now presented for some minutes was awful in the extreme. Frightful spasms in the throat appeared to menace him with strangulation—and he writhed with all the convulsive elasticity of a stricken serpent. His eyes glared—his tongue lolled out—and a white foam stood upon his upper lip. Then there was a brief interval of furious delirium, under the influence of which the miserable man besought the milliner in most piteous terms not to murder him and bury his corpse beneath the stone!

Mrs. Brace wrung her hands in desperate anguish: what was she to do?—what would be the issue of all this? The thought that she would procure a deadly poison and administer it, flashed across her brain: but the next moment she remembered that the doctor had been sent for, and he would not fail to discover the cause of the man's death! She dared not, therefore, murder him—although she longed to do so:—and now she cursed herself for having allowed him to live up to the present time!

Wildly she cast around her eyes, as if in search of something that should offer a suggestion how to act in this cruel, this torturing emergency. But no inspiration did she derive from the fevered glance which she thus flung about on all sides. Her bewilderment and perplexity increased every moment. She dared not kill him—and yet she dared not let him live. If she murdered him, the deed was sure to be discovered: if she spared him, he would reveal in his ravings enough to send her to the scaffold. With either alternative her own fate appeared to be sealed. God's revenge against murder now seemed to be approaching with inevitable certainty: her crimes were on the verge of exposure and of punishment. Fate was building up a wall of adamant around her: she could see it rising slowly, slowly—but surely, surely—on every side,—as if it were a sepulchre that was closing in upon her!

Oh! no human language can depict the torture which the wretched woman now endured for the space of ten long minutes: no power of description can convey an idea of the excruciating agony which rent her mind as she was forced to look her position in the face. *There* lay her paramour, writhing in hideous convulsions, like one possessed of a devil: and *there* stood she, with the ghastly pallor of her cheeks appearing through the rouge which, though so artistically laid on, now appeared to be naught save a mere plaster of dullest red.

At length Frederick Dray grew calmer: but, though his ravings sank into low mutterings and his convulsions subsided into a nervous restlessness, he did not seem to recover the full use of his intellect. On the contrary, his brain appeared to be wandering; and his eyes glared wildly upon the countenance of Mrs. Brace as she seated herself by the side of the couch. He did not altogether recognise her—that is to say, he had no distinct idea who she was: but he contemplated her with mingled aversion, terror, and mistrust.

He was in this condition when the door opened gently; and a domestic introduced the medical man who was in the habit of attending upon Mrs. Brace and the inmates of her establishment. As he approached the bed, the invalid's excitement was revived; and the couch shook and creaked beneath his convulsing form. Then, on the doctor's taking his hand and feeling his pulse, he shuddered and trembled like a spaniel that fears a whipping—and all the time he surveyed the medical man with a fixed look of ferocity and apprehension.

Having felt his pulse, the doctor stepped aside a few paces so as to allow the curtains of the bed to conceal him from the view of the invalid: and beckoning Mrs. Brace towards him, he put several questions to her in a low whispering voice. She explained as well as she was able the symptoms that she had observed: and when the doctor had thus gleaned from her all that she could tell him upon the subject, he said, "Do you know whether this person has ever experienced any hurt or injury of a peculiar character?"

"Not that I am aware of," returned the milliner.

"Does he keep a dog of any kind?" asked the medical man.

"Oh! no," replied Mrs. Brace. "On the contrary, he cannot bear them."

"Then, to speak more plainly still," said the doctor, "are you aware whether he has ever been bitten by a dog?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the milliner, a sensation of sudden horror seizing upon her as the damp of death strikes to the very marrow of one's bones when descending into the crypt or sepulchres of some ancient cathedral. "Yes—I recollect—on a certain occasion—a dog got into the house—and as the invalid was dragging it forth from under the bed, it lacerated his arm."

"Then, madam," returned the doctor, "there is no hope for this person. In a few hours he will be numbered with the dead," he added in a scarcely audible whisper, and with a grave seriousness of countenance. "You must make up your mind to behold a hideous and shocking death-bed—for there is naught more appalling than the agonies of hydrophobia!"

"Ah! then it is really this dreadful malady which has seized upon the wretched man?" said Mrs. Brace, shuddering all over with an irrepressible feeling of horror, which was as painful for the moment as the bitterest affliction could possibly have proved.

"Yes, madam—it is hydrophobia," returned the doctor; "and no earthly power can save that man. His doom is sealed—his fate is unalterable: 'tis the same as if his coffin were already made and his grave dug—for in a few hours he will be numbered with the dead!"

"But, doctor—doctor," said Mrs. Brace, with a feverish nervousness of manner and an agitated tone, as she laid her trembling hand upon the surgeon's arm,—"is it catching? do I incur any danger by watching at his side? If he were to bite me—if the foam of his lips were to touch me——"

"No harm can arise, madam," was the response:

"you have nothing to fear. But now the convulsions and spasms are seizing upon the invalid again—and I must administer some sedative. In a few minutes I will return."

The doctor accordingly hastened away to procure what he required from his own dwelling, which was in the immediate neighbourhood;—and during his absence Frederick Dray passed through another fit of furious delirium and excruciating pain. He raved in a manner that was shocking to hear: and he writhed and tossed upon the couch as if invisible serpents had coiled around him. At one moment he besought and implored Mrs. Brace in the most piteous terms not to murder him: then he invoked heaven's vengeance and hell's curses upon her head. Yet all this while he neither sought to harm her, nor even to move from the bed on which he was racked by such intense and poignant agonies.

The fit had somewhat subsided by the time the doctor re-appeared; and he now proceeded to force the invalid to swallow an opium dose. By assuming a commanding tone and authoritative aspect, he succeeded in coercing the miserable wretch; and the sedative soon produced its effect. Dray grew tranquil, and presently fell into a slumber that was apparently easy.

"The moment he wakes up again, madam," said the doctor, "administer another dose. If you have any difficulty in persuading him to swallow it, send immediately for me. But I pray you to understand that this treatment is merely adopted in order to smooth his passage into another world, and not with any hope of prolonging his life in this. His doom is sealed—and no earthly power can save him."

The doctor then took his departure, with an intimation that he would return again at midnight, if he were not fetched before.

"And he may rest assured that I shall not send for him!" muttered Mrs. Brace to herself, as she resumed her seat by the side of the couch. "Thank my stars that this man," she added in her musings, as she glanced towards the sleeper, "is about to die: it has perhaps saved me the crime of another murder!"

Then the milliner fell into a deep reverie, during which all the incidents of the last twenty years of her life rose up in her imagination, vivid and clear as if even those which were most remote had occurred but on the yesterday. She looked back to the time when she was in all the glory and splendour of her charms—she saw herself gradually becoming bolder and bolder in the course of vice and immorality—she marked her career deepening into profligacy, until she became as dissolute as a Messalina—and she could trace the process by which her heart grew callous and hardened, until it was completely ossified against all feelings and emotions of a better kind. Then, as she thus gradually followed her own career along the vista of memory, down to the very time when she was now seated by the bed-side of the doomed wretch who was shuddering and moaning in his sleep, she could not help thinking—indeed, the conviction was insensibly forced upon her mind—that had she in her earlier years chosen the paths of virtue and rectitude, she would have been happy, honoured, and respected now,—but that having deviated into the ways of vice and debauchery, she had been gradually yet irresistibly led on to crime—and this crime was already opening a yawning gulf at her feet!

While these appalling thoughts were uppermost in her mind, Frederick Dray suddenly awoke;—and a fit of delirious anguish and spasmodic poignancy, more terrible than the former ones, seized upon him all in a moment. With eyes that glared like those of a tiger—with the foam upon his mouth—and with his features all livid and swollen like those of the drowned, he writhed, tossed, and raved in a manner that was horrible to witness.

"Let me go—let me go!" he cried: "fiends are tearing me with their claws of red-hot iron—serpents are coiling round me and darting forth their fiery tongues in my face! Let me go, I say—let me go! Hell opens to receive me—the eternal gulf sends up its forked flames to enwrap my form. Some demon is thrusting a long sharp wire through my brain——O horror! horror! I cannot endure it! Hell———fiends———demons——spare me—spare me! Take away these monstrous serpents that encircle me—their touch is pollution—their breath is poisonous. O God! how their coils wind round me—now cold and clammy——Oh! so cold, so clammy! I can't endure it, I say—'tis hell—'tis the eternal torture itself! And now they are searing my brain with red-hot iron—they are tearing my eyes from their sockets—they are stabbing my heart in a thousand places. Just heaven! can this be my doom? Oh! take away those dead bodies from my sight—remove those cold, cold corpses! I did not do it—no, no—I did not murder that one—nor yet that one! Ah! who says I hanged him? No—no: you lie—you lie——'twas she who did the deed—'twas she—the milliner—Mrs. Brace—the woman whom I loved—whom I coveted—whom I enjoyed—and whom I now loathe! Take her away—take her away! 'Twas she who tempted me—she murdered the first man—and I buried him under the stone in the back kitchen——you will find him *there!* Aye—and the other, too—they are both there——both—both!"

The wretched man's voice died away in a sound resembling the bark of a dog;—and as Mrs. Brace raised her eyes from the convulsing countenance on which they had been fixed in dread and horror during those fearful ravings, she saw the doctor standing before her.

"Ah! madam, I warned you that it would be terrible," he said, shaking his head solemnly. "Alas! for poor human nature! Man—vain man—glorifies himself: and yet he may be reduced to such a wretched, hopeless state as this at last! But you must not suffer this scene to produce too great an effect upon your mind, madam," added the doctor, perceiving that the milliner was gazing at him in mute horror and consternation from the chair in which she was seated.

"Did you not hear what he said?" she at length demanded, in a voice of sepulchral hollowness: and her look grew more steadfastly fixed and more despairingly intent, as if she felt that the answer of the medical man would be the pronunciation of her doom.

"Yes, madam—I heard the terrible things he was uttering in his delirium," said the doctor: "but I am so accustomed to listen to the ravings of disordered imaginations, that they have almost ceased to produce any effect upon me. It is no uncommon

occurrence for the rabid and insane to accuse themselves or others of the most heinous crimes."

"Ah! is it indeed so?" cried Mrs. Brace, greedily catching at the explanation which the doctor gave naturally enough; for he little thought how much truth there was in the last words that he had overheard falling from the doomed man's lips.

"Take her away! take her away!" suddenly yelled forth the wretch, breaking out again. "It was she who incited me, I say——'twas she who made me do it! The first man was murdered by her hand alone——"

"For God's sake give him opium!" whispered Mrs. Brace, seizing the doctor's arm with nervous violence and upturning towards him a countenance the ghastliness of which terrified him for a moment.

"I will do so," he said: "give me the bottle."

But scarcely had he taken it in his hand, when Frederick Dray flung forth both his arms with a sudden paroxysm of lancinating agony; and the phial was dashed from the surgeon's grasp.

"They shall not hang me—they shall not force me up the steps of the scaffold!" he cried in an infuriate manner. "No—no—they must not pinion me—they must not fasten the noose round my neck and put the nightcap upon my head! I am not guilty——I did not murder *both*——only *one!* 'Twas she—'twas she," he yelled forth, fixing his savage glaring eyes upon Mrs. Brace, and extending one arm with pointed finger towards the wretched woman who shrank back shuddering all over in the easy-chair where she was seated. "She poisoned the first man, I tell you——and she helped me to hang the second. Then we raised a stone——it was in the back kitchen——down below——the back kitchen——of the other house, mind——and then we buried them at dead of night——not both at the same time, though both together——"

"Sir——doctor——my dear friend," murmured Mrs. Brace, now recovering the use of her speech and once more clutching the medical man violently by the arm;—"you must put an end to this——or it will drive *me* mad also!"

"Oh! now the serpents coil more and more around me!" yelled forth the rabid wretch; hell's flames have caught me—I am on fire——I am on fire——I am burning——'tis agony—anguish——horror, horror! Ah! now the fiends are bearing me to the scaffold——they have pinioned me—they have fastened the noose round my neck—they have drawn the white cap over my face——Oh! I cannot breathe—they are suffocating me——and now they have stood me upon the drop——horror! horror! I hear the bolt giving way——Stop! I will confess!—a moment—a single moment! Chaplain, a word in your ear——Hark! listen! This is what you must do: take a crow-bar—raise the central flag-stone in the back kitchen——and there, buried deep, deep, beneath the mould, you will find the two murdered men! But, ah!" shrieked forth the dying maniac his whole form convulsing horribly, and his eyes ready to start out of his livid, hideous face,—— "this is treachery—infernal treachery! Have I not confessed?—have I not told you where the bodies lie? And yet you leave me here upon the drop——with the noose round my neck and the cap over my countenance——Hell! fiends! maledictions!—you are going to hang me after all—— horror! horror! the bolt is drawing back—the drop is slipping beneath my feet——O God!"

And with a tremendous convulsion that made the bed creak and even the very room shake perceptibly, the wretched man gave up the ghost.

Half senseless with the awful consternation that was upon her, Mrs. Brace lay back in the arm-chair;—and she had only a dimly vacant idea that her accomplice in crime had breathed his last. Twice did the medical man whisper to her that he was dead, ere she seemed thoroughly to comprehend him: and then, all in a moment, a singular revulsion of feeling took place within her. A sensation of relief suddenly superseded that tremendous terror and blank despair which had almost crushed both her physical and moral energies; and as she said to herself, "My persecutor and tyrant is no more—I am now free!" it seemed as if a load were lifted from her mind and she had regained a lost independence.

This abruptly revived sense of security armed her with a proportionate courage and presence of mind;—and rising from the chair, she flung a rapid look upon the livid and distorted countenance of the corpse. Its appearance was horrible in the extreme. The eyes, stony and glaring in death's awful vacancy, seemed ready to start from the head—the tongue lolled out—and around the mouth were large flakes of foam speckled with blood.

"He raged dreadfully in his last moments," said Mrs. Brace, now turning her eyes quickly upon the surgeon, and with that piercing glance endeavouring to read the nature of the impression which Dray's delirious outpourings had made upon his mind.

"I have seldom heard or witnessed anything more dreadful," observed the medical man: but his tone and demeanour convinced Mrs. Brace that he attached no importance to the ravings of the deceased, and was consequently very far from suspecting how entirely they were based upon truth.

"What shocking things—Oh! what shocking things—appeared to have been uppermost in his mind!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, now affecting a tone and air of commiseration for the dead.

"Maniacs, or people in a rabid condition such as that which we have just witnessed," returned the doctor, "frequently dwell upon some particular idea which they conjure up to haunt them. But as my services are no longer needful here, madam, I shall wish you good night."

Mrs. Brace shook hands with the medical man, who thereupon took his departure:—and the milliner hastened to her own parlour, where she immediately partook of a large dram of brandy. She then sate down, though at that late hour—for it was now past midnight—to meditate upon the occurrences of this memorable evening.

CHAPTER CCIX.

MR. RIGDEN'S OFFICE.

We must now return to Caroline Walters, who, it will be remembered, fled from Mrs. Brace's house with considerable precipitation after the sudden explosion of her deeply ramified scheme. She had resumed the page's livery, simply because she

would have found it inconvenient to be seen hastening through the streets of London in a bridal-dress at that time of night: but it was not her intention to adopt the same disguise which she had hitherto worn. For it must not be forgotten that the fearful accusation of murdering Mrs. Lindley, the midwife, was still hanging over her head; and that the fact of her having escaped from the custody of Grumley, by throwing herself from the window of the house in Fore Street into the Thames, as described in an earlier chapter, would only tend to confirm the general belief in her guilt. For the world did not know that Grumley had connived at that escape: and even if his disappearance had led to any suspicions on that head, they would not in any way alter the circumstantial evidence that pointed out Caroline as the murderess of the midwife.

While thus retrospectively glancing at these matters, we must also observe that though it was generally believed Miss Walters had perished in the Thames, yet this supposition on the part of the public by no means rendered it prudent for her to roam undisguised about the streets of London. Many persons had seen her at the police court when she was examined—the authorities of Horsemonger Lane Gaol were acquainted with her personal appearance—and all the various customers who had visited Mrs. Brace's establishment during the time she was in the milliner's service, would be capable of recognising her. Moreover, Lord Florimel, under the influence of rage and disappointment at the issue of the evening's adventures and the cheat she had endeavoured to practise upon him, might hasten and inform the officers of justice that Caroline Walters, accused as the murderess of Mrs. Lindley, was now actually in London: and therefore the young woman was environed by a thousand perils.

But she did not despair of surmounting them. She had plenty of money in her pocket—some of her own, being the accumulation of her wages while in Florimel's service; and some which he had given her to carry out all the arrangements of that evening. Thus provided, she was not at a loss how to act. Taking her way, accordingly, to a shop in Wardour Street where masquerade costumes and fancy-dresses were let out for hire, she knocked at the door, for the place was now closed and the shutters were up, it being past ten o'clock. The mistress of the shop answered the summons, and Caroline immediately said, "Do you remember the black page who hired the dress of a gipsy at your establishment?"

"Some months ago—for the great masquerade at Covent Garden?" observed the woman, inquiringly.

"The same," answered Caroline. "Well, you must remember me, then?"

"Oh! yes—to be sure?" said the woman. "The black page was only a pretty young girl after all—because I helped to dress her: and you are the same. I thought your face was not unfamiliar to me—and that livery too! Besides, you behaved very liberally to me—and that is another reason why I ought to remember you. Walk in, Miss—and tell me what I can do for you."

Caroline accordingly entered the house; and when she was alone with the woman in her parlour, she said, "You have seen me disguised as a black page—you have helped to disguise me as a gipsy—and now you behold me disguised as a white page. What garb and character can you possibly recommend that will disguise me more effectually still?"

"You are somewhat too short for a young officer in the army, with a nice pair of moustaches," said the woman, in a musing tone, as she contemplated the slender and symmetrical shape of Caroline. "But if I was to put a pair of whiskers on your cheeks, they would at all events give you a masculine look."

"No—I do not fancy the officer's garb," observed Miss Walters. "I should seem ridiculously short in that dress, and my appearance would only court disagreeable attention. Think again—and be speedy."

"A midshipman in the navy!" exclaimed the mistress of the fancy-dress warehouse. "You might have a delicate pair of whiskers—I mean a moderate-sized pair, glossy and curled—just to prevent your face from appearing too babyish or too feminine;—and the blue garb of a sailor, with the neat little dirk by your side, would not be too glaringly attractive."

"Be it as you say!" exclaimed Caroline. "But have you such a dress ready at hand and which is sure to fit me?" she demanded.

"I should not have proposed the middy's uniform if I had not been prepared to supply it, young lady," said the woman. "And as for the whiskers," she added, producing a paste-board box containing a large assortment of those artificial embellishments for cheeks that were virgin of the razor,—"here you may pick and choose according to your own good pleasure."

Caroline accordingly selected a charming pair of false whiskers; and, the uniform being likewise produced, she was shown up-stairs into a chamber, where the mistress of the warehouse aided her in the arrangements of her new toilette. The midshipman's apparel fitted to perfection; and she seemed a sweetly interesting boy, until the whiskers were fastened with a solution of gum-arabic to her cheeks. Then, the dirk being slung to her waist, she looked like a youth of about one-and-twenty, very short in stature, and of delicate features. To increase the manliness of her appearance—or rather, to diminish its feminine air as much as possible—she consented to allow the woman to cut off a considerable portion of her beautiful hair;—and, when this sacrifice was made, she felt as she looked in the glass that she could now defy detection even on the part of the most searching eyes.

Having paid the mistress of the shop a liberal price for the articles thus purchased and the attentions ministered, Caroline Walters sallied forth;—and, after some little hesitation as to the immediate proceedings which she should adopt, she repaired to a coffee-house, where she called for some refreshment, together with writing materials. Her orders being obeyed, she wrote two brief letters: one was addressed to the *Marchioness of Bellenden, Bellenden Priory, Edgeware Road,*—and the other to the *Chief Magistrate at Bow Street.* She then went out again—put her letters into the nearest post-office box—and returned to the coffee-house. Here she ordered a bed for the night; and on being shown to a chamber, she at once retired to rest.

At about ten o'clock on the following morning, Caroline Walters, disguised in her midshipman's apparel, called at Mr. Rigden's place of business in Featherstone Buildings. On entering the outer office, she inquired whether the attorney was within; and the head clerk, turning to a youth who was busily engaged in copying some deed, said, "Alfred, go and tell the governor that a young naval gentleman wants to see him if he's disengaged."

"You know, sir," replied the youth, who was a pale, sickly, but interesting and intelligent lad of about seventeen or eighteen, and who addressed his superior in a tone of the deepest respect,—"you know, sir, that Mr. Rigden is very busily engaged this morning, and has given orders that he will not be disturbed."

"Ah! I recollect," said the principal clerk, in a musing tone: "he's preparing instructions for counsel in that affair of *Woodfall versus Florimel*."

"Indeed, sir!" ejaculated Alfred, with a sudden start; and Caroline observed that the youth's countenance, which was naturally pale, flushed with a glow of animation.

"Yes," continued the head clerk, not noticing that change which had thus struck the attention of the disguised young woman: "Mr. Rigden is deep in that case—and a very important one it is too. I do not therefore believe he will see anybody, unless it is on very particular business."

"*My* business is very particular," said Caroline. "Please to obtain me an immediate interview with your master," she added, speaking to the youth.

Alfred looked at the head clerk, who nodded his assent: and the boy stepped into Mr. Rigden's private office. He re-appeared in a few moments, and desired Caroline Walters to enter the *sanctum*. This invitation she immediately obeyed, closing the door behind her;—and when the seeming midshipman stood in the presence of the lawyer, the latter gazed upon her with the air of a man to whom the countenance of a visitor is not altogether unfamiliar, although he cannot at the moment guess where or when he has seen it before.

"You do not recognise me?" said Caroline, with an arch smile: then, instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she observed, "But you remember the young woman who brought you certain important documents a few months ago?"

"Ah! now I know you, my mysterious acquaintance!" cried the lawyer, with a partial smile. "But wherefore this disguise?"

"That is my affair," said Caroline, laconically. "I have called to inform you that Florimel has returned to town—and, what is more, that he has guessed by whom the documents were stolen from him. But the individual who took them is beyond his reach—and there is no chance of exposure in that quarter."

"Then our position remains unaltered and safe?" observed Mr. Rigden, inquiringly.

"So far as Florimel is concerned," replied Miss Walters. "But there is a certain lady who exercises a great influence over George Woodfall, the claimant to the Florimel peerage and estates; and I have reason to believe that she would play him false in order to serve her own purposes."

"You doubtless allude to the Marchioness of Bellenden?" said the lawyer. "But depend upon it, your suspicions are wholly unfounded. The Marchioness is a model of virtue, excellence, and piety—and she would not do a wrong action for the world. Ah! you smile incredulously ——"

"Perhaps I am too suspicious," observed Caroline, the sardonic expression still wavering upon her lips. "But I presume that if George Woodfall were to suffer himself to be persuaded by the Marchioness or anybody else to quash the proceedings already instituted on his behalf, he has the power, and you could not go on without his assent?"

"Exactly so," exclaimed Rigden. "But you cannot fancy that Mr. Woodfall would be mad enough to abandon a process which he is sure to gain in the long run?"

"Does not a certain Miss Rose Foster reside at Bellenden Priory?" asked Caroline: "and is not Mr. George Woodfall deeply in love with this young lady?"

"Such, I believe, are the facts," said the attorney.

"But what then?"

"Simply that Miss Foster lies under the deepest obligations to the Marchioness of Bellenden, and that her ladyship consequently exercises a boundless influence over the girl," continued Caroline. "This influence can of course be brought to bear upon George Woodfall: and now I will ask you, Mr. Rigden, whether you have not found the young gentleman hanging back somewhat during the last few weeks?"

"Well," said the lawyer, in a deliberate tone as he took a pinch of snuff,—"since you mention the fact, I must confess—indeed, I cannot conceal from myself, that Mr. Woodfall has *not* appeared so particularly urgent of late as he was at first—and he has moreover hinted that he experienced some reluctance in disturbing Lord Florimel in the enjoyment of the peerage, although he would certainly like to adjust the matter of the fortune in an amicable manner."

"Now will you believe, Mr. Ridgen," demanded Caroline, "that some secret influence has been at work?"

"But wherefore should the Marchioness of Bellendon interfere?" cried the attorney. "Is it because I am Lord Montgomery's solicitor and engaged against her ladyship in the memorable case which has been so long pending between his lordship and her, and which now verges towards a close? I can scarcely think that a lady who is so celebrated for her many virtues, her amiability, and her generous feelings, can possibly stoop to such meanness as to exercise her influence over Woodfall, simply because chance has made *me* his professional adviser."

"We will not stop to inquire into motives, Mr. Rigden," said Caroline: "but we will fix our attention upon facts. It is clear, then, that the Marchioness *has* used her influence to some little degree to prevent Mr. Woodfall from being too precipitate in the business——"

"But she has been absent for some weeks," observed Rigden.

"True. Miss Rose Foster has however remained at the Priory, in the care of a trusty old housekeeper, during the visit of Lady Bellenden to the country," said Caroline; "and Mr. Woodfall has of course visited the girl frequently. The Marchioness has no doubt corresponded with

Rose—and the advice insidiously conveyed in her ladyship's letters has exercised, through the agency of Miss Foster, the desired influence upon the mind of Mr. Woodfall. It needs no ghost to afford us this explanation, or enable us to gain this insight into the matter."

"You appear to be admirably well acquainted with all that is passing in certain quarters," said Mr. Rigden, surveying the disguised young woman with mingled curiosity and wonder. "But who could have supposed that the Marchioness of Bellenden possessed such a really petty mind and mean disposition?"

"Perhaps you will know more of her character some day," observed Miss Walters, drily. "At all events I have now told you sufficient to make you aware of the influence which has been exercised over George Woodfall. On my side, I have already adopted a measure which will perhaps induce the Marchioness to change her policy in that respect: but I thought it better to give you this hint notwithstanding—because, should you observe a recurrence of vacillation or backwardness on the part of Woodfall, you may know to what cause to attribute the same. I suppose you are up to your neck in business?" remarked Caroline, as she flung a look over the piles of papers which covered the lawyer's desk.

"Yes. What with the case of *Montgomery versus Bellenden* and that of *Woodfall versus Florimel*, together with other important matters," said Mr. Rigden, "I have scarcely time to take either food or rest."

"And who will gain the former suit, think you?" asked Caroline.

"It is hard to say—hard to say," replied the cautious attorney, taking snuff. "I am sadly perplexed with it, I can assure you. The presence of young Lord Raymond Montgomery, the Earl's brother, is absolutely necessary to the favourable

progress of the cause—and I cannot get him up to London. He does not even reply to my letters. But he is a singular character—disappointed in love—and living, I believe, in a most secluded manner. However, I shall take a run down into the country in a few days and ferret him out."

"I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you," observed Caroline, as she rose to take her departure.

"Hush!" said the attorney, tapping his snuff-box: for while the young woman was yet in the middle of her remark, Alfred appeared in the room from the outer office—and, as her eyes were fixed at the moment upon the papers to which she had alluded, she did not observe the entrance of the youth.

The lawyer's sudden warning caused her to start and turn her looks towards the door: and as her eyes fell upon Alfred's countenance, she was struck by the conviction that the same glow of ill-subdued joy which she had previously observed, again lighted up his features.

A singular feeling arose like a presentiment in Caroline's bosom: and she experienced an uneasiness which she could not explain to herself.

"Who is that boy?" she inquired abruptly, so soon as Alfred had delivered a message and withdrawn.

"He has been some few weeks in my service," answered Rigden. "But wherefore the question?"

"I scarcely know!" said Caroline. "And yet I do not altogether like his appearance. There is something sneaking in his manner and sinister in his look. Take care of him—that's all."

"You really alarm me, young woman," observed the attorney: "for, to tell you the truth, I took him without either reference or character——"

"So did Lord Florimel engage me at the beginning," thought Caroline within herself.

"Yes—contrary to my usual caution," added Mr. Rigden, taking a huge pinch of snuff, "I suffered myself to be over-persuaded by some history of woe and distress which Alfred told me: and being in want of just such a youth at the instant, I engaged him. He seems a steady, intelligent, well-meaning lad——"

"Take care of him, I repeat," interrupted Caroline, dogmatically "I don't like his physiognomy—though heaven knows I should be sorry to be the means of depriving him of his bread, if he is really honest. I may be deceived, therefore: but once again I say, be upon your guard."

And with these words Caroline Walters took leave of Mr. Rigden.

CHAPTER CCX.

THE CHAIN OF EVIDENCE.

In the meantime the chief magistrate at Bow Street had been much surprised by the perusal of a certain letter which was delivered to him by the usher of the court the moment his worship took his seat upon the bench. The letter, which was anonymous and written in a pretty female hand, contained a statement so remarkable, that the magistrate knew not precisely how to deal with the case. But after a little consideration, he retired into the private room, and summoned thither the head constable to deliberate over the matter.

"Crawley," said the magistrate to the individual who thus filled the post which Mr. Peter Grumley's mysterious disappearance had left vacant some months previously,—"what do you think of this?"

The head constable perused the letter which the magistrate placed in his hand; and, after nearly a minute's profound reflection, he said, "I am quite puzzled, your worship."

"What sort of a character is borne by the person referred to therein?" demanded the magistrate.

"Gay—and not over particular, your worship,' was the reply: "used to be much patronised by the upper classes—'specially the lords and gentlemen. But I don't think—that is, I can scarcely fancy there's any truth in this piece of information."

"And yet it is singular—very singular," observed the magistrate. "If a responsible person had come forward to give private information of such a character, we should at once act upon it and issue a search-warrant. But this anonymous missive, perhaps intended after all as a piece of fun or wickedness——"

"And still, your worship," remarked Mr. Crawley, "some kind of notice must be taken of the matter. Suppose I just step down there and in a quiet way institute a little inquiry?"

"Yes — that will be best, Crawley," said the magistrate: "and in the meantime let the circumstance of the arrival of such a letter be maintained a profound secret. If nothing comes of it, then the fact of such a serious accusation having been made through sheer wickedness and with a view to injure an innocent person, need never become known."

"Just, so, your worship," replied Crawley: and putting the anonymous letter in his waistcoat-pocket, he proceeded to execute his commision.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Crawley was walking along Pall Mall, when he noticed that he was being followed by a thin, miserable, half-starved mongrel dog: and, finding that the poor animal persisted in remaining close at his heels, he was about to kick it away, when it suddenly struck him that he was not altogether unfamiliar with the appearance of the beast.

"Surely this must be the brute that Mobbs used to have prowling after him?" muttered Mr. Crawley to himself: then, recollecting the name of the dog of which he was thinking, he said, "Toby! Toby!"

The poor beast instantaneously began wagging its tail with delight; and rising on its hind legs, it began to lick the constable's hand.

Crawley now examined the dog with more attention: and he at length became convinced that it was the identical one which belonged to Mobbs. The discovery of the animal rendered him very thoughtful and serious: and as he walked along, he muttered between his teeth, "Well, there's something very strange in this. It's like another link in the chain ——and now I'm more inclined than I was at first to attach some importance to the contents of the anonymous letter."

Thus musing, Mr. Crawley proceeded on his way along Pall Mall—passed Mrs. Bracc's establishment, into which he gave a good stare—and sped to a butcher's shop in Bury Street, where he ordered a copious repast of meat to be bestowed upon

the dog. Toby devoured the welcome provender with a ravenous appetite; and, having lapped up a suitable quantity of water, he frisked about the constable's legs and leapt up to lick his hand as if in gratitude for the kindness shown him.

"Now then," said Mr. Crawley to himself, as he sallied forth from the butcher's shop, with the dog at his heels, "we'll investigate this little business."

Retracing his way, the constable was just on the point of turning out of St. James's Square into Pall Mall, when he ran against a gentleman who was coming quickly round the corner.

"I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed Mr. Crawley.

"No offence, my man," said the gentleman: then, as his eyes fell upon the dog, he observed, "You must get that beast muzzled as the warm weather comes on. I don't like the look of him."

"Lord bless ye, sir," cried the officer, patting the mongrel as it raised itself against his leg, "I'm not afraid of dogs. On the contrary, I love them dearly—and though I've been bit once or twice, you see I'm not dead of —— what d'ye call it?"

"Hydrophobia, you mean," said the gentleman: then, taking the constable by the button-hole, he observed in a serious tone, "My good fellow, do not treat the matter thus lightly. If you had witnessed the dreadful spectacle which I saw last night, you would never forget it."

"Was it a case of——what d'ye call it again?" asked Mr. Crawley.

"Hydrophobia," returned the gentleman. "My time is precious—and I dare say yours is too: but it is my duty, as a Christian and a medical practitioner, to detain you for a moment while I give you a warning that may be serviceable. Last night, then, I was summoned to see a person who was supposed to have gone mad. I went, and found him labouring under the influence of hydrophobia. 'Twas a truly shocking case: and in his delirious ravings he uttered language which haunts me still, accustomed though I am to scenes of horror."

"Was this case so very terrible then, sir?" inquired Crawley.

"The most terrible death-bed I have ever witnessed," returned the medical gentleman. "The unhappy wretch died under the belief that he was suffering the last penalty of the law upon the scaffold. He accused himself and a lady who was by at the time, of having committed two most horrid murders: and to show you what dreadful freaks the imagination will play its victim under such circumstances, he actually believed that he was making a confession to the Newgate Ordinary as he stood upon the drop. He fancied that the objects of his imaginary crimes had been interred beneath a stone—in a back kitchen——"

"Hey? what?" cried Mr. Crawley, now becoming much excited as well as deeply interested. "Where, in heaven's name, sir, did this affair take place?"

"At a house close by," answered the medical man. "Indeed, I have just been to visit the lady herself and ascertain whether she had recovered from the fright. But wherefore do you regard me in this singular manner?"

"Because, sir," replied Crawley, solemnly, "I have good reason to believe that the history you have just told me is another link in a chain of evidence——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the doctor, unfeignedly shocked and amazed: "you do not mean me to infer that there is any foundation for the dreadful tale of the double murder?"

"Read this, sir," returned Mr. Crawley: and he put the anonymous letter into the doctor's hand.

The contents were as follow:—

"*To the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street,*

"Under the great flag-stone in the back kitchen of Mrs. Brace's house in Pall Mall, lie buried the bodies of the two missing officers, Grumley and Mobbs. How they came by their death, is for your worship to discover."

The doctor staggered against the wall for support, as his eyes ran over these few lines. He was seized with consternation and horror at the thought that a woman whom he had professionally attended for years, could have been guilty of such hideous crimes, or even an accomplice in their perpetration. He knew that Mrs. Brace was not the most immaculate being in existence: but he was utterly unprepared for the discovery that her profligacy as a gallant lady was nothing in comparison with her black turpitude as a criminal.

"You are astonished, doctor—and well you may be," said Crawley, as he took back the letter and once more secured it in his waistcoat pocket. "I would not believe it at first, although I came to investigate the business as a matter of course. But link after link in the chain of evidence has been supplied—I don't know whether by accident or by Providence——"

"Yes—it is Providence that does all this!" exclaimed the doctor, in a solemn and impressive manner. "I suppose you are an officer of justice?" he observed, after a brief pause.

"Exactly so," returned Crawley. "Be pleased to give me your card, sir—as I may want your evidence presently."

"Unhappy woman!" said the medical practitioner, as he complied with the constable's demand: "to what a pass has she brought herself! Oh! now I remember her agitated looks—her singular expressions—her frightened manner, last night: but far—very far was I from attributing all that trouble and terror to the true cause. It is a painful duty which you have to perform, constable, in taking a woman into custody on such a charge."

"I'm accustomed to it, sir—and my feelings are rather tough," observed Mr. Crawley. "But I shall say good bye for the present: and when I want you to attend to give evidence, I'll let you know."

The doctor and the officer then separated: and while the former returned slowly and in deep thought to his own dwelling, the latter hastened back to Bow Street to report to the magistrate all that had occurred and procure the necessary assistance for pushing the investigation to the end.

About half-an-hour afterwards, Mr. Crawley, armed with a warrant, and attended by three subordinate constables,—followed also by the mongrel Toby,—suddenly made his appearance at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall.

The three young females whom Mrs. Brace still kept in her employment, were in the shop at the moment when this alarming irruption took place: but the milliner herself was in her favourite parlour, pondering over the incidents of the last twelve hours, and congratulating herself on the death of Frederick Dray.

"Where's the lady of the house?" demanded Crawley of the foremost of the three young women, who were seized with alarm at the appearance of the constables. "Auswer me in the King's name."

This summons made the affrighted girls aware of the official position of the intruders: and so great was their terror that they were unable to answer the question put to them. The constables accordingly pushed through the shop into the house: and Mrs. Brace, hearing the sound of footsteps, came forth from her parlour to ascertain what was the matter.

But the instant she beheld the visiters, her conscience told her who they were and why they came: and, with a moan of ineffable anguish, she fell senseless at their feet.

At the same moment the dog sprang towards her, and began barking as if at a known enemy; and Crawley had some difficulty in preventing the animal from snapping at the limbs of the motionless woman. Ordering one of his men to remain in charge of her, the officer descended the kitchen stairs, followed by the other two Bow Street runners whom he had brought with him, and likewise attended by the faithful dog. Entering the servants' room, he ordered those whom he found there, to hasten up to the parlour and administer the necessary restoratives to their mistress;—and the domestics, who saw full well that there was something wrong, lost no time in doing as they were commanded—but rather to obtain the speedy gratification of their curiosity than through any particular affection for Mrs. Brace.

We must leave the reader to imagine the mingled horror, surprise, and dismay which seized upon the domestics when they heard the tremendous truth from the lips of the constable left in charge of the murderess. In the meantime we shall follow Mr. Crawley and his party to the back kitchen, whither they soon penetrated.

The moment they set foot in that place, the dog Toby bounded forward and began sniffing and whining round the central flag-stone.

"You see the instinct of that poor beast," observed Crawley: "he knows his master is buried underneath—and he knew also just now that he owed some kind of a grudge to Mrs. Brace—for he would have certainly bit her if I had not drawn him off. Depend upon it, this here dog was a witness of the murder."

"No doubt," replied one of the subordinates: and producing a crow-bar, a pick-axe. and a spade from a sack which he carried, he said, "Shall we fall to work, sir?"

"By all means, my man," returned Crawley. "The last link in the chain of evidence lies below,—or I am terribly out in my reckoning."

To their task the two assistants went; and the fact that the stone had been recently disturbed was soon proven by the facility with which it was now raised from its setting. Then the circumstance of the earth yielding easily to the shovel, was a farther sign that the information contained in the anonymous letter and the testimony acquired from the doctor would turn out to be correct. In another half-hour, all uncertainty—if any had still existed upon the point—was at an end: for the livid corpse of Mobbs was first drawn forth from the grave—and then the putrifying body of Grumley was dragged up in its turn and stretched on the paved floor of the kitchen.

Thus did the unblest tomb give up its dead at last: thus did the deep pit surrender its murdered tenants to furnish the last damning link in the chain of evidence against the milliner!

Meantime the unhappy woman had been recalled to consciousness, in the parlour where she had been left to the care of the constable, and whither her servants had hastened at Crawley's bidding. And, oh! to what excruciating memories and poignant convictions was the wretched milliner thus aroused. For an instant, on opening her eyes and gazing wildly around, she had fancied and flattered herself that she was labouring under the influence of a horrible dream: but when she beheld the sinister countenance of the officer, and then read consternation mingled with a morbid curiosity upon the features of her servants, she knew that it was *not* a vision, but a hideous reality;—and as her mental looks were flung forward along the vista of the future, in order to estimate at a glance the consequences which she had to fear or the amount of hope which she might entertain, the prospective view that she thus took was suddenly bounded by the scaffold which rose up, black and ominous, before her!

Oh! we have said elsewhere, and we repeat it now—for the fact cannot be chronicled too often—that the folly of crime is, if possible, even greater than its guilt. There is no condition in the world, however deplorable or however perilous, that can be really and positively ameliorated by wrong-doing. The poor man may become rich by means of a crime: but will his riches, thus acquired, bring him happiness? No—ten thousand times no! There may or there may not be such a secret spiritual thing within us as conscience: but assuredly our own hearts reward or torture us according to our deserts. He who commits a crime, lives in constant danger and dread of detection: and such an existence as this hath no enjoyment. Better to eat a crust in the consciousness of personal security, than sit down to the most sumptuous banquetting-board in terror at every knock at the door! Better to walk through the streets without a penny in the pocket, yet fearing no molestation, than to roll in a carriage along the fashionable thoroughfares in the apprehension that every police-constable who looks at the equipage is about to stop it and drag forth its owner!

The annals of crime all proclaim these facts. Fauntleroy, the forger, passed years in an unceasing state of mental excruciation: he plunged into dissipation to drown care—but even with the wine-cup at his lip or in the arms of beauty, was he haunted by a phantom that ever with extended hand pointed to the scaffold. What did Hocker obtain by the murder of Delarue? And would it not have been better for the Quaker Tawell to have thrown himself upon his knees before his wife and avowed his illicit connexion with another, rather than have put that other to death? The result was that his wife not only discovered the amour, but has now to mourn for the rest of her days that she is the widow of a murderer. Again, what did Rush acquire by his wholesale assassinations?—instead of the undisputed possession of his farm, he earned an ignominious death. And what gained the Mannings by their crime?—nothing to

compensate them for one single moment of the mortal suspense which they endured until they were captured, or of the hearts' goadings which they must have subsequently suffered till the drop fell beneath their feet on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

Now, setting aside the black iniquity of the crimes just alluded to, let us contemplate their folly. Because if a man has not within himself a sufficiency of virtue to deter him from wrong-doing, let us appeal to his more selfish feelings—his egoism, in a word—and show him that he is a fool and an idiot to endanger his personal security. Doubtless the individual who makes up his mind to perform a deed of turpitude, hugs the belief that he will remain undiscovered. But experience is against this delusive—this fatal reasoning. Where one criminal escapes, ninety-nine are detected: the few exceptions, therefore, only prove the general rule. Out of a hundred persons who fling themselves off Waterloo bridge, in order to commit suicide, one may be saved by the boatmen from the shore: the remainder succeed in accomplishing their dreadful purpose. But what man in his sound senses would calculate upon those chances, and arrive at the conclusion that if he leaps from the bridge in a frolic he is sure to be the *one* who will be rescued? Such a proceeding would be utter madness—bedlamite folly: and so it is with *crime !*

To return, however, to our tale. In an almost senseless condition was Mrs. Brace borne to a hackney-coach which was procured to convey her to Bow Street: and within an hour or two the whole of the West End was thrown into a perfect consternation and dismay by the intelligence that the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall had been arrested for the murder of the two missing constables.

When placed in the dock at Bow Street, the wretched woman recovered a sufficiency of her presence of mind to make her fully conscious of the awful position in which she stood: and, clinging tenaciously to hope even unto the very last, she proclaimed her innocence with the most passionate vehemence and an abundance of tears.

The testimony of the medical man was given—Crawley deposed to the details relative to the exhumation of the bodies—and the magistrate was about to remand the prisoner until the result of the Coroner's inquest should be made known, when the usher of the court informed his worship that there was a female in the waiting-room who had some important evidence to give. The magistrate ordered her to be introduced;—and in a few moments a young woman, overwhelmed with grief—pale—care-worn—and having the appearance of one who had only just risen from a sick bed, entered the court, leaning upon the arm of the usher. In this manner was she supported into the witness-box, where she was accommodated with a seat: and Mrs. Brace at once recognized the wan and altered features of Harriet, her discarded lady's-maid.

For some time the unhappy young woman was so convulsed with painful feelings, that she could not give utterance to a word. But at length she grew comparatively tranquil: and then, amidst many heart-wrung sobs and bitter lamentations, she proceeded to state all she knew concerning the murder of Grumley. She detailed how on entering the chamber of her mistress one night, she was informed that a dead body lay in the adjoining bath-room—how she had consented to break the matter to Frederick Dray and obtain his assistance in the disposal of the corpse—and how the murdered man was buried beneath the stone in the back kitchen. But she averred—and truthfully averred—her entire ignorance of the fact that Mobbs had subsequently shared the same fate, until she had heard of the discovery of the *two* dead bodies when calling an hour back at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall. She also gave an account of the incident which had occurred one morning in the milliner's bed-room, when she had found Frederick Dray with his mistress, and when the former was so severely bitten by the dog which had secreted itself in the chamber. In conclusion, she stated that she had not now come forward to give her evidence through any jealous or vindictive feeling towards Mrs. Brace—but because the part which she had taken in the concealment of Grumley's body weighed heavily upon her mind, and she felt that her conscience would be eased by a full confession of all she knew and all she had done relative to that matter.

Having listened to everything that the unhappy young woman had to say, the magistrate inquired whether she had written an anonymous letter containing intelligence of such a nature as had led to the measures adopted by the constables to test the accuracy of that information. But Harriet positively declared that she had not written any letter of the kind. The anonymous billet was then read by the clerk: and the writer of it was duly called upon to come forward. No one responded to the summons: and the magistrate thereupon instructed Crawley to take such steps as he might consider expedient with a view to ascertain whence the mysterious missive had emanated.

His worship, with much gentleness of tone and commiseration of manner, proceeded to inform the unhappy Harriet that he should be forced to regard her, on her own confession, as an accessary after the fact in respect to the murder of Grumley: but he took it upon himself to assure her that the contrition which she now manifested and her desire to aid the purposes of justice, would not be lost sight of on the day of trial. To these observations Harriet replied that she was not ignorant of the peril to which she exposed herself when resolving to come forward and confess everything she knew: and her mind was evidently much relieved by the course which she had thus adopted.

But the murderess—Mrs. Brace, the once fashionable milliner,—she who had been the paramour of the Prince of Wales and of the handsomest and gayest nobles of the West End,—this wretched woman was completely overwhelmed by the presence of Harriet and the testimony she had given. Every ray of hope—even the last and faintest—had now disappeared: the crime was brought fully home to her—and with an awful shuddering that shook her frame to the innermost confines of her whole being, did she perceive that her fate was sealed!

The magistrate ordered the milliner and the lady's-maid to be both committed for trial,—the former on the charge of a double murder, and the latter as an accessary after the fact in respect to one of those crimes.

The prisoners were now removed to separate cells preparatory to the arrival of vehicles to convey them to Newgate. But ere the bolt of the massive door was drawn upon Mrs. Brace, she requested to speak to Mr. Crawley. This functionary was accordingly fetched from the court, and the milliner said to him, "Have you any objection to allow me to see the anonymous letter which was spoken of just now?"

"None at all," answered Crawley. "You would be entitled to a copy of it in the depositions." Here it is."

"That is the handwriting of Caroline Walters!" exclaimed the milliner, the moment she glanced over the billet: and a fiendish expression of vindictive malignity settled for a few moments upon her countenance, already so ghastly and changed!

"Caroline Walters?" echoed the constable. "I should know that name."

"The young woman who murdered Mrs. Lindley, the widwife of Fore Street," said Mrs. Brace.

"Ah! and who escaped from the custody of Peter Grumley!" ejaculated the officer. "Then she is lurking somewhere about in London."

"She was at my house last night—first disguised as a black page," continued the milliner—"and then apparelled as a bride. But doubtless she has adopted some other garb of concealment by this time."

"Very good. If she's in London, I will have her in custody before twelve hours elapse," exclaimed Crawley. "I suppose she was an accomplice in the affairs which have got you into trouble, ma'am?"

"Nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Brace: "and I am utterly at a loss to imagine how she became aware——But of that no matter," cried the milliner, suddenly interrupting herself with feverish impatience. "Lose no time in searching for her—trace her out—arrest her—hang her—for it is she who will have sent me to the scaffold!"

And falling back upon her seat in the cell, the miserable woman, whose courage and presence of mind appeared to have returned during the former portion of her colloquy with the officer, gave free vent to all the mental agony that was now breaking up as it were the foundations of her soul.

An hour afterwards, the milliner and the lady's-maid were the occupants of separate cells in the prison of Newgate.

CHAPTER CCXI.

THE PATRICIAN LADY AND THE PLEBEIAN GIRL.

We must now return to Caroline Walters, whom we left at the conclusion of her interview with Mr. Rigden.

On issuing forth from that gentleman's office, she retraced her way to the coffee-house where she had passed the night: and seating herself in a corner of one of the boxes, she opened a book in the contents of which she soon affected to be deeply absorbed. But her thoughts were elsewhere—and her ears were open to catch every piece of intelligence which any new comer might happen to impart to the other persons frequenting the place. Nor was Caroline compelled to remain very long in suspense, ere she acquired the certainty that her letter to the Bow Street magistrate had produced the wished-for result.

"I say," exclaimed an individual who bounced into the coffee-room at about half-past one o'clock in the afternoon, and who thus familiarly addressed himself to three or four of his acquaintances who were seated there,—"I say, my fine fellows, have you heard what an awful discovery and precious smash there's been up at the West End just now?"

"No. What is it?" was the query put with all the impatience of suddenly awakened curiosity.

"You remember that two Bow Street Officers, one Grumley and one Mobbs, disappeared very suddenly some little time ago—don't you? Well," continued the informant, "their fate has come to light this morning—and it seems they were murdered——"

"Murdered!" cried the listeners, with shuddering voices.

"Yes — murdered—and in a most mysterious manner too," continued the informant. "At all events their bodies have been dug up from under a stone in the kitchen or back-yard—I don't exactly know which——"

"But where? where? Who murdered them?" demanded the listeners, their curiosity now rising to a degree of fever-heat.

"You'll be astounded when I tell you. In fact, every body is astonished—no one can scarcely believe it——"

"But who is the murderer?" was the anxiously repeated query.

"Mrs. Brace, the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall: and she is at this moment in the dock at Bow Street!"

"Mrs. Brace!—good heavens!—who would have thought it?" were the ejaculations which now burst forth from the lips of the listeners. "But is it certain that she did it?—and under what circumstances?"

"Ah! that is not known at present. I was passing by the Police Office just now, and seeing a tremendous crowd round the door, I naturally inquired what was the matter. Then I heard all that I've just told you. I tried to get into the court—but it was thronged to suffocation, and the usher wouldn't allow me even to make the attempt. There's no doubt of Mrs. Brace's guilt, from all I could learn."

"And how was the thing discovered?" demanded a listener.

"I didn't learn," responded the informant. "We shall know all about it in the course of the afternoon—and to-morrow morning's papers will be full of the proceedings."

Caroline Walters lost not a syllable of this conversation. A hyena-like joy — the blending of ferocity and triumph—sprang up in her bosom as she thus learnt the success of her scheme; and the blood coursed hot and fevered through her tingling veins as she gloated over the immeasurable vengeance which she had wreaked upon the milliner.

"Ah! it was an evil day for thee, vile woman," thought Caroline within herself, "when thou didst sell me—*me*, the orphan confided to thy charge—to the treacherous, graceless, unprincipled Florimel! Mine is a nature to love fervidly—devotedly: but it is also a nature to avenge terribly. Ah! well do I remember, when first consigned to the dread solitude of my chamber at the infamous abode of

Mrs. Lindley,—well do I remember saying to myself that if I could not live on for love, I might for vengeance! And so soon as this vengeance of mine shall have been gratified,—when the milliner has swung upon the scaffold, and my seducer has been despoiled alike of rank and fortune,—then shall I care not how soon I quit this world of woe. Yes—vengeance first—and then suicide!"

And as she thus gave way to her reflections, the young woman leant with her elbow upon the table—her hands supporting her head—and her eyes fixed upon the book. She saw nothing *outwardly:* all her senses—all her faculties—all her thoughts were absorbed in that reverie the mental vision of which looked only *inward.*

At length, slowly awakening as it were from this morbid dream, she collected her ideas: and remembering that she had a particular character to enact and a special part to play—or in other words, that she must not yield to abstractions in which the most trivial incident might betray her sex—she cast a rapid look around the room to ascertain whether she had become the object of any marked attention. But the other persons present were too busily engaged in discussing the arrest of Mrs. Brace to notice anything peculiar that there might have been in the attitude or appearance of the disguised midshipman;—and she was therefore reassured on this head.

It was now nearly three o'clock: she accordingly desired some refreshment to be served up to her;—and having partaken thereof, she sallied forth from the coffee-house. Her present object was to engage a suitable lodging, where she might dwell in privacy and security while watching the progress of her schemes and the gradual operation of her vengeance. Without being particular as to what direction she took or in which neighbourhood she should choose an apartment, Caroline sped towards Oxford Street; and her steps chanced to lead her into Cavendish Square.

She was traversing this fashionable district in order to reach some of the streets which lay beyond, when her attention was all of a sudden caught by the features of a young lady elegantly dressed and leaning on the arm of an elderly gentleman of aristocratic appearance. This couple were about to enter a house in the Square at the moment that Caroline Walters was struck by the countenance of the lady: and hastening forward, she said, "Pardon me, madam—but I am delighted to meet you once more!"

"I do not recollect you, sir," was the haughty reply: then, as some sudden reminiscence flashed vaguely and dimly to the lady's mind, she fixed her eyes more intently upon the countenance of the disguised midshipman, observing, "And yet your features are not altogether unfamiliar to me."

"We once vowed friendship to each other," responded Caroline; "and beneath the roof of Mrs. Lindley."

"Ah! I recollect—you are Miss Walters!" exclaimed Fernanda—for Lady Holderness it was, in company with her husband: and she did not appear to be over well pleased at this encounter.

"What—Caroline Walters!" ejaculated Lord Holderness, starting nervously, and surveying the disguised female in a peculiar manner. "The young woman who was arrested——"

"And falsely accused of the murder of that same Mrs. Lindley whose name I mentioned ere now," added Caroline, in a firm tone and with a dauntless demeanour. "Madam," she continued, once more turning towards Fernanda, "I know not who you are—your name and rank you scrupulously kept concealed from me when we were dwelling beneath the same roof——"

"For God's sake detain us not, young woman," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a hasty and imperious whisper, as the liveried footmen opened the front-door: and pushing Fernanda gently forward, the nobleman followed her into the hall.

Another moment—and the door was banged in Caroline's face.

But the instant that Lord and Lady Holderness were alone together in the parlour, they exchanged uneasy and troubled looks: then, as Fernanda tossed off her bonnet and threw aside her shawl, she said, "I do not like this meeting with that girl!"

"Nor I," returned the nobleman, in a voice of nervous excitement. "Something akin to a prescience of evil has struck me——"

"And yet I do not see of what we have to be afraid," interrupted Fernanda, whose natural courage speedily came back to her aid. "It is impossible that this girl can have obtained any clue——"

"Who knows? who knows?" cried Lord Holderness, with increased trepidation alike of voice and manner. "Ah! Fernanda, conscience renders us the most despicable of cowards——"

"Say rather that conscience renders *you* a coward," exclaimed Fernanda, her scarlet lips wreathing with a contemptuous expression, and her violet eyes flashing a look of ineffable scorn upon her husband. "For my part," she continued, in that haughty tone of proud defiance which she was so frequently wont to adopt, "I acknowledge not the power of conscience and ridicule everything that savours of what the world calls a presentiment."

"How often, Fernanda—oh! how often," cried Lord Holderness, trembling visibly, "must I implore you not to add blasphemy and impiety to the other crimes——"

"Which we have *both* committed—eh?" observed that young patrician female who was strong-minded in her wickedness. "But do not give way to idle terrors, Walter," she added in a milder tone. "At first I must confess that I was not particularly well pleased with an encounter that might lead to mischief and could not possibly do any good: but I have no doubt that Caroline Walters has gone her ways and will not let us hear of her any more. Besides, what after all could she say against me? That I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley's establishment under particular circumstances. But to scandalize me behind my back, would be to draw down suspicious looks upon herself: and those suspicious looks would speedily penetrate the disguise in which she has clothed herself. No—no: trust me, Walter, that we have nothing to fear from that young woman."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when a loud double knock at the front door resounded through the house; and in a few moments the footman appeared, ushering Caroline Walters (whom the domestic of course took for a young naval officer) into the presence of Lord and Lady Holderness.

"What means this intrusion?" demanded Fer-

nanda, haughtily and fiercely, the moment the footman had withdrawn: and her eyes shot forth lightnings at Caroline.

"Did we not pledge an eternal friendship at Mrs. Lindley's?" was the exclamation of her to whom the peremptory query was addressed.

"But do you imagine me to be ignorant of the fact that you are charged with the murder of that woman?" cried Lady Holderness, now endeavouring to frighten and subdue Miss Walters by the assumption of a look of stern menace.

"It may be so," said Caroline, with a calmness that almost staggered Fernanda: "but I am innocent, nevertheless! Lady Holderness, I now know who you are— I know also that this is your husband: and if I have made any unpleasant allusion before him, it is your ladyship who has provoked it. Had you treated me with only ordinary kindness when I met your ladyship ere now at the door of your mansion, I should have been gratified—and not for a single instant should I have thought of obtruding myself farther upon your notice. A kind word, in recognition of former friendship, would have warmed my heart towards you: but your ladyship treated me with contumely—with insult;—and my wounded pride prompted me to resent this ungracious demeanour on your part."

"And would you have me apologise for what I have done?" demanded the patrician lady, in a tone of haughty defiance—though in her breast a certain misgiving, almost amounting to a positive uneasiness, had risen up while Caroline was speaking.

"Apology!" ejaculated Miss Walters, with a contempt as bitter as any irony that Fernanda was capable of using. "No apology from your aristocratic lips to my plebeian self would be sincere—and therefore I should reject it with scorn. But listen to me for a few moments. Not a quarter of an hour has elapsed since the door of your mansion was closed in my face. All the blood boiled in my veins: my soul was fired with resentment. Away I sped to the nearest shop: and there, while purchasing some trifle, I asked who lived at such-and-such a number in Cavendish Square. The shopkeeper was garrulous--and I learnt in a few minutes twenty times more than I could have possibly expected to glean in so short a space concerning you."

"And what have you thus learnt!" demanded Lady Holderness, still maintaining a tone and manner of cool defiance—while her husband walked towards the window and back again to the farther extremity of the room, with an agitation and a nervousness that he could not conceal. "What have you learnt, I ask?" repeated Fernanda, with the affected indifference of a conscious security, but really for the purpose of ascertaining how much Caroline knew, and whether she suspected anything more than what she had gleaned in the neighbourhood.

"I will answer your ladyship's question," returned Miss Walters. "From the communicative shopkeeper I learnt that Lord and Lady Holderness dwelt in this house—that Lord Holderness has two daughters, the Honourable Misses Clarendon, who do not live with him—and that Lady Holderness was the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer, niece of the Earl and Countess of Desborough."

"Is that all?" inquired the patrician lady, fixing her eyes intently upon the countenance of the disguised female.

"Not quite," responded the latter. "Some time ago it was whispered that the Honourable Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, and Miss Fernanda Aylmer were engaged to be married—but the match was broken off—Mr. Eaton became a prey to what was deemed an incurable malady—and Miss Aylmer was reported to have gone upon the continent. But Miss Aylmer did *not* visit a foreign clime," proceeded Caroline, with emphasis: "on the contrary, she retired to an establishment of mingled mystery and horror in Fore Street, Lambeth, where I formed her acquaintance. Ah! and she told me many, many things which were incomprehensible *then*,—many, many things relative to her vengeance, which was progressing with a certainty as terrible as its nature and its origin were alike unsuspected by its victim! But *now*, lady—*now*," exclaimed Caroline Walters, "I am enabled to understand all that was incomprehensible *then!* Having learnt who you are, and recalling to memory everything you told me at the midwife's house, I cannot possibly experience any difficulty in reading your history. It is clear to my mind as the noon-day sun is bright to the eye. Arthur Eaton seduced you—and *he* therefore was the victim of your vengeance. He was perishing by a slow and mysterious malady that defied all the wisdom of the physician—all the skill of the surgeon. *That* was the dark and deadly nature of your revenge! But he suddenly gets better—the spell is lifted from his existence—and in a short time he recovers altogether. Ah! lady, that was because you failed, for some reason or another, to carry out your vengeance to a full consummation! But, behold! the invisible hand of an unrelenting and remorseless persecution still follows him: he recovers from that malady which appeared to be hurrying him to the grave—and he is plunged into Newgate for a crime which he was incapable of committing."

"Who says that?—who dares to prejudge——"

And Fernanda stopped short in the exclamation which mingled anger and excitement was wringing from her lips.

"Who says so?" cried Miss Walters, with a stern and implacable expression of countenance. "I say it! Oh! I am quick—marvellously quick in penetrating into the deepest mysteries, the moment that I obtain a key to the decyphering of them! And what is more, proud lady," added Caroline, with a withering bitterness of accent, "I know that you are capable of anything and everything!"

"What mean you?" asked Fernanda, her presence of mind rapidly failing her, and yielding to agitation of emotions and confusion of manner.

"I mean, lady," continued Caroline Walters, in a tone that was solemn and sombre to a degree, so that Fernanda remained with the upheaved bosom of breathless suspense, and Lord Holderness stood still, motionless as a statue, and with every lineament of his pale countenance indicating a profound terror mingled with a poignant curiosity,—"I mean,' repeated the young woman whose ominous looks and voice had thus powerfully enthralled the attention of her patrician listeners,—"I mean that some months ago—on a night of storm and of

tempest—aye, a fearful night, and just fitted for the foul deed which rendered it more truly horrible than the profound darkness and the warring elements themselves could make it,—on that night, I say, a window was opened at the back of a house overlooking the Thames—and a new-born child was flung forth from the chamber where its mother lay,—yes, flung forth by the murderous hand of the midwife—to be engulfed in the rapid, dark, and turbid waters that rolled below!"

"Hush—speak not so loud!" murmured Lord Holderness, horrified at this tale which he now heard for the first time, but which he had no difficulty in associating with his wife.

"Caroline, wherefore all these particulars?" demanded Fernanda, repressing, as well as she was able, the cold shudder that she felt creeping over her form at this re-awakening of all the terrible memories connected with that night of horror.

"Besides, it is all mere assertion on your part!" she exclaimed, in a bolder and haughtier tone.

"Assertion!" echoed Miss Walters, bitterly: "what! when the plaintive shriek of that murdered babe—*your* babe, lady—still rings in my ears—aye, and vibrates unceasingly in my brain! Oh, my God, it appeared to me *then*—it appears to me *now*—as if I were an accomplice in the tremendous tragedy of that foul night! Because I heard the faint scream of the innocent as it fell from the casement into the swollen river; because I knew that it was the child of the patrician young lady who tenanted the next room to mine,—because I had no doubt that Mrs. Lindley herself was the murderess,—and because I subsequently gleaned from your lips enough to convince me that you were in the full possession of consciousness when you gave birth to that child, and therefore that you were cognizant of the doom to which the accursed

old harridan devoted it,—it was on account of all these circumstances, I say, that I felt as if I myself became an accessary and a co-partner in the appalling crime, inasmuch as I held my peace and gave no warning to justice of its perpetration!"

"Fernanda, Fernanda," whispered Lord Holderness in a hollow voice, as he drew his wife forcibly aside for a moment: "what are we to do with this young woman?—what does she require? Let us get rid of her, for heaven's sake!"

"Yes, yes," responded Lady Holderness, speaking hurriedly and apart to her husband: "but we must not appear to be afraid of her:"—then, turning towards the disguised female, she said in a more conciliatory tone than any she had yet adopted, "Caroline, you are heaping together a number of accusations, inferences, and suppositions, in order to vent your spite upon me—simply because I did not receive you with open arms the instant that you accosted me ere now. But let us abandon that style of discourse. Accusation can be met by recrimination;—and, even if all we may bring forward on either side be strictly true, no beneficial result will arise to either of us. For you dare not proclaim to the world anything you know or fancy you know concerning me: and, for my part, I have not the least inclination to call in a constable and tell him that Caroline Walters is in my house, disguised in a naval uniform and an exquisite pair of whiskers."

"Ah! you adopt a bantering tone with me!" exclaimed Caroline, her wrath being piqued anew by the slight yet perceptible accent of irony which marked the concluding words of Fernanda's speech, and also curled her lip gently as she uttered them.

"You are determined to quarrel with me, Caroline," said Lady Holderness, now condescending to smile with a partial degree of affability. "But this is too absurd! What possible benefit will accrue to either of us by charges and counter-charges of a disagreeable nature. Tell me how I can serve you. Do you require money—advice——"

"Neither," interrupted Caroline in a peremptory manner. "But I am glad that we have met—because my ideas have all on a sudden been turned into a thoroughly new channel, respecting certain events that until within this hour have seemed buried in the most profound and impenetrable mystery."

"And those events?" said Fernanda inquiringly: but despite of all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure, the strong woman was shaken from head to foot by cruel alarm and apprehension,—aye, and not only from head to foot—but to the innermost recesses of her haughty and impious soul.

"Those events!" echoed Caroline, in a voice of cruel triumph. "Oh! it is not necessary to particularise them, lady—unless it be to observe that as surely and certainly as I am innocent of the death of Mrs. Lindley the midwife, so is Arthur Eaton guiltless of the murder of William Dudley!"

And having thus spoken, Caroline Walters was hastening from the room, when Fernanda sprang forward and caught her violently by the arm, saying in a deep and strangely altered voice, "We must not part yet, young woman—nor in this manner."

But Caroline would have broken forcibly away from the patrician lady, had not a sudden moaning and sobbing met her ears and caused her to turn her head. Then she beheld Lord Holderness convulsed with overpowering emotions—rocking to and fro on the sofa where he had flung himself—and covering his face with his hands.

"What does your ladyship require of me? and why do you detain me?" demanded Caroline.

"Let us be friends—dear friends once again—as we were at the midwife's," said Fernanda, still in that altered and agitated voice, and with a manner so troubled that she no longer attempted the vain task of concealing it.

"Lady, your proposal has come too late," responded Caroline, with a sinister and gloomy solemnity. "Your patrician arrogance sought to trample me under foot—your aristocratic presumption endeavoured to crush me beneath its heel. But the worm—aye, the humble worm—has turned, and has already frightened you! Beware lest it change into a serpent and sting you to the quick!"

Fernanda fell back in dismay at the terrible threat which was thus proclaimed, and at the flashing looks of scorn and ferocious triumph which accompanied the menace;—and Caroline Walters, availing herself of that opportunity, rushed from the room and quitted the house.

Well and truly indeed had she declared that the occurrences of the last hour had turned her thoughts into an entirely new channel—or rather, had opened to them an avenue along which they might travel with some degree of certainty and clearness relative to the course which they were thus taking. She had suddenly been led to contemplate many things in a new light: it appeared to her as if she had all in an instant and most unexpectedly emerged from a dense fog in which she had hitherto been walking;—and the result was that she had become inspired with a hope that changed the entire aspect of her destiny.

She longed to be alone in some room where she could sit down and ponder upon all these matters;—and so impatient was she to carry her new thoughts into some solitude where she might open this suddenly-found budget of ideas and weigh them one by one without hindrance and free from observation, that she could not wait to search for a lodging. She accordingly retraced her steps to the coffee-house already mentioned; and on entering the public room, she found it well nigh filled with customers who were engaged in discussing the particulars of Mrs. Brace's examination at Bow Street.

Caroline paused for a few minutes to listen to the details which the topic thus evolved; and she thence learnt that Harriet the lady's-maid had appeared as a witness and was included in the committal to Newgate. Something was also said about the anonymous letter: but the information which those present in the coffee-room had obtained on this head, was too vague and slight to furnish any accurate notion of what had really taken place at Bow Street in connexion therewith.

Ignorant, therefore, that her missive to the magistrate had given rise to any proceedings calculated to menace her own personal safety,—but, on the contrary, gloating over the evident success of the means which she had adopted to ruin Mrs. Brace and send her to the scaffold,—Caroline Walters quitted the coffee-room and repaired to

the chamber which she had occupied on the previous night.

"That's a smart young fellow," observed one of the customers of the house, addressing the remark to the knot of persons with whom he was discoursing.

"Who do you mean—the boy in the middy's uniform?" exclaimed another of the group. "Well—for my part, I'll be hanged if I don't think it's a girl in disguise. There's something peculiar in the gait and walk——"

"Girl in disguise!" ejaculated Crawley, the Bow Street Officer, who happened to enter the coffee-house at this moment. "Who was speaking of a girl in disguise?"

"Do you want such a person, old fellow?" asked the previous speaker, to whom the constable was well known.

"I want a certain young woman—and she's very likely to be in disguise," was the response. "The fact is, I've just got Mrs. Brace's affair over—she's off to Newgate—and now I'm on the look out for another female——"

"Ah! this is quite a girl, I should say—unless it's really a boy after all," said the previous speaker; and every one present laughed at the coarse jest.

"Come, describe your hero, or heroine, as the case may be," observed Mr. Crawley, as he drew forth a paper from his pocket. "Here's the description of the girl that I want."

"Well," continued the previous speaker, "I should say that the young person of whom I'm talking, must be about one or two and twenty, if of the male sex and having neat whiskers: but not more than seventeen or so, if of the female sex and having false whiskers."

"Age sixteen and a half," observed Mr. Crawley, referring to the paper which he held in his hand. "Short in stature—well made—rather slight—brunette complexion—very fine dark eyes—splendid teeth—rich red lips——"

"By jingo! it is the very same!" cried several voices. "But who is she? What has she done? Poor thing!—who'd have thought it?"

The constable waited not, however, to respond to these questions or pay any regard to the ejaculations of wonder and curiosity that arose from the assembled frequenters of the coffee-house: but proceeding straight up to the bar, he inquired which was the chamber of the young person alluded to in the preceding conversation. The bar-maid had overheard everything that had been said, and therefore had no difficulty in answering the query thus put;—and in less than a minute the constable entered the room to which Caroline Walters had so recently repaired.

She instantaneously saw that she was discovered. The appearance of the man denoted his calling—and the unfortune girl could not do otherwise than divine the object of this visit. For a few moments she trembled—turned very pale—and looked confused: but recovering her presence of mind, she boldly demanded his business. This was at once explained, precisely as she had foreseen: and Caroline affected to laugh at the idea that she was other than what she seemed—namely, a veritable midshipman. But Mr. Crawley was confident that he had made no mistake in the matter: and he insisted that she should proceed with him to Bow Street. Caroline was forced to comply; and as she passed through the coffee-room in the custody of the officer, the ardent curiosity of which she found herself the object, brought a burning blush to her cheeks. That crimson glow and the downcast look which accompanied it, confirmed the suspicion already entertained with regard to her real sex;—and on arriving at the police-office, she was fain to confess the truth in order to avoid the ignominy of being stripped by the searchers.

She was then placed at the bar—identified as Caroline Walters—and, after a brief examination, committed to Newgate to take her trial for the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the mid-wife.

CHAPTER CCXII.

ALFRED.

We must now return to Mr. Rigden's offices in Featherstone Buildings.

After Caroline Walters had taken her departure, the youth Alfred seized an opportunity to write the following words upon a slip of paper:—"*At last I have succeeded! You may expect me to-night.*" Then, still unobserved by the head clerk who sate facing him at the huge double desk in the front office, the boy folded up the paper in the form of a note—wafered and addressed it. A few minutes afterwards he found a pretext for slipping out; and hastening to the nearest two-penny post, he dropped his letter into the box. He then returned to the office—resumed his place at the desk—and continued the work upon which he was engaged.

Meantime Mr. Rigden, ensconced in the arm-chair at his own desk in the inner office, was once more deeply engrossed in the study of the various deeds which lay spread out before him: until he was presently aroused by the entrance of his noble client, the Earl of Montgomery.

"Ah! I am glad your lordship has come," exclaimed the solicitor, taking a pinch of snuff with his usual precaution, so as not to permit the slightest grain to fall upon his shirt-frill. "I was most anxious to see your lordship——"

"Has anything farther transpired?" demanded the Earl, with an accent and a manner that appeared to indicate a feverish impatience.

"Nothing particular, my lord," returned Mr. Rigden, with his usual sententious coldness. "But your lordship is aware how awkwardly I am situated in respect to your brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery; and as matters are now coming to a crisis, I wish to know whether your lordship or I shall undertake a journey into Warwickshire to represent to Lord Raymond the absolute necessity of his paying some little attention to the important suit so soon to be decided. I presume your lordship has received no communication from him?"

"None whatever," replied the Earl, gloomily.

"It is now nearly two months, my lord," continued Rigden, "since the Master in Chancery was prepared to deliver his reports in the several matters of 'Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' 'Raymond Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' and 'Aylmer *versus* Bellenden.' But inasmuch as we did not then succeed in persuading Lord Raymond to

come up to London and attend to the business—indeed, as the letters which we addressed to him remained altogether unanswered—I was compelled to put in certain affidavits, as your lordship is aware, in order to effect the postponement of the case."

"And the postponement was granted for two months—was it not?" said the Earl of Montgomery, inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord—until the end of May," was the response.

"And that will be in five more days," observed the Earl, in a musing tone. "Well, you had better send off your head clerk into Warwickshire without delay; and if he don't find my brother at Malden Farm, I am sure I do not know where he is to search after him."

"And yet it is of the utmost consequence to *him*, my lord," said Rigden, "that he should be found. You must remember that singular clause in your ancestor's will, under which Lord Raymond claims the Wawickshire estates? If he do not comply with the conditions of that clause on or before the day on which he shall attain his twenty-second year, then does he forfeit all his right and title to those estates. Now, according to his baptismal certificate, he will be twenty-two on the 30th of May; and on the 31st the Master in Chancery will deliver his Report. Should that Report be unfavourable to Lord Raymond's claims altogether, it will of course matter little or nothing whether he has complied with the testamentary conditions, or not: but if the Report should be favourable—and I do not possibly see how it can be otherwise—then will it only remain for me to show the Lord Chancellor that the testamentary conditions aforesaid *have* been complied with."

"And if they have not?" said Lord Montgomery, with a subdued nervousness.

"Why, your lordship knows as well as I do," exclaimed Mr. Rigden, "that in the case you have mentioned, two thirds of the Warwickshire estates would go to Miss Aylmer—or rather Lady Holderness—and one third to you,—that is to say, always supposing that we gain our suit against the Marchioness of Bellenden."

"And of that you have little doubt?" said Lord Montgomery, inquiringly.

"The addditional evidence which you procured about three months ago—when your lordship went into Warwickshire, for the purpose, you know," said the lawyer.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the Earl, with something like petulance in his tone and manner. "I remember what you mean."

"Well, my lord," continued Rigden, surprised at the nobleman's irritable impetuosity, "the light which you were enabled to throw upon the case, on your return to London, and the subsequent investigations which we caused to be made down in the country, have all produced a visible effect upon the Master's mind and seem to have given a new complexion to the whole matter. Frankly speaking, then, I am sure we shall beat Lady Bellenden as completely and thoroughly as ever a suitor in Chancery was vanquished yet."

"What! beat her on every point?" cried the Earl, joyfully.

"Yes, my lord," answered Rigden: "and now I am proclaiming a positive opinion for the first time. Indeed, it is not my habit to commit myself to my clients by means of pledges and promises. But if I do not beat the Marchioness in respect to your claims—in respect also to Lord Raymond's claims—and lastly, in respect to the claims of Lady Holderness,—then will I consent to be denounced as a fool and branded as a liar."

"I am charmed to hear you speak thus confidently, my dear Rigden," said the Earl: and now his features brightened up, and a gloomy cloud which hung over them when he first entered the lawyer's office, disappeared altogether. "But you will not fail to send off for my brother Raymond?"

"I will despatch my head clerk this very afternoon, my lord," returned the man of business. "He shall start in an hour, and travel post haste to Malden Farm. If he does not find Lord Raymond there, he will doubtless obtain some tidings concerning him. At all events, we will do our best;—and if the young nobleman is so indifferent to his own interests, as to have gone away and left no clue to his whereabouts, at a time when such an important case is pending,—why, he deserves to lose everything—that's all I can say about it. But still, as the solicitor in this suit, it is my duty to leave no stone unturned in the endeavour to find him out—and that duty shall be performed."

"To be sure—certainly," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "I will write a letter to my brother; and your clerk can take it with him."

The Earl accordingly sate down and penned a long epistle to Lord Raymond, whom he urged to come up to London without delay. He likewise besought him to forbear in future from treating his relatives with such cruel indifference as he had lately exhibited towards them,—reminding him that more than three months had now elapsed since any tidings had been received from him. The Earl stated that their mother, the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, was especially hurt at the long and obstinate silence which Raymond had thus preserved: and he concluded by imploring his brother to exert his moral courage and rise superior to the disappointment which he had experienced in respect to their cousin Fernanda.

"There!—will that do?" exclaimed the Earl, throwing the letter across the desk to Mr. Rigden.

"Excellently well, my lord," replied the attorney, who hastily cast his eyes over the contents. "I really had begun to think that your lordship was secretly desirous for your brother to remain absent and leave the testamentary conditions unfulfilled, in order that his heritage might lapse to Lady Holderness and yourself. But now I perceive that I wronged your lordship by the suspicion——"

"You could scarcely deem me guilty of such unkindness, Rigden!" interrupted the Earl, starting from his seat and turning red as a peony: then, with as rapid a transition becoming ghastly pale, he added, in a voice which he vainly essayed to render steady and composed, "Besides, would it not be a palpable folly on my part to prefer my cousin to my brother, even if I had any power to influence the results at all?"

"Well—I should think so, truly," observed Rigden: "it would be a palpable folly indeed. But if I gave your lordship offence by hinting at the suspicions which had been gathering in my mind, I humbly beseech your lordship's pardon."

"Oh! it is granted, Rigden—it is granted," cried the Earl, now recovering his equanimity. "You will let your clerk become the bearer of this letter, then?" he observed, so soon as he had folded, sealed, and addressed the missive.

The attorney responded in the affirmative: and Lord Montgomery took his departure.

"There is something strange—something unaccountable, about my noble client," muttered Mr. Rigden to himself: "and despite of his indignant denial—despite also of the letter which he has written—I still believe my suspicions to be well grounded. He has always been very intimate with his cousin Fernanda—*too* intimate I have sometimes thought. But be all that as it may, I care not. His lordship is one of the best of my clients—and that is the principal point I have to regard." With this comfortable conclusion, Mr. Rigden rang the bell. The head clerk was summoned into his presence and ordered to make immediate preparations for a journey into the midland counties. The attorney gave him the requisite instructions, letters, and money; and the official departed in a post-chaise for Warwickshire.

Throughout the remainder of the day did Mr. Rigden continue to pore over the documents lying upon his desk; and as the business was now becoming urgent, he stayed at the office long after five o'clock. The head clerk, as we have just described, was absent—and all the others, save Alfred, left the place at the usual hour. The youth however remained to shut up the office.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Mr Rigden took his departure, thoroughly fagged with his fatiguing day's work. No sooner was his back turned, when Alfred rubbed his hands gleefully and appeared scarcely able to restrain his joy within moderate bounds. But having given vent to his exultation, he sate down again and waited a full half-hour ere he took any step in the execution of the project which he had in hand. Then, feeling assured Mr. Rigden was gone for good, and that there was no chance of his return that night, the youth rose from his chair, muttering, "Now is the time!"

The lawyer invariably locked the door of his own private office ere he left, and as regularly took away the key with him. This Alfred of course well knew; and he was prepared to meet the difficulty. Taking a small skeleton key from his pocket, he speedily opened the door; and on entering the private office, he found that all the parchments and papers of any consequence had been removed from the desk. For a moment he was staggered with the fear that Rigden might have carried away the very identical documents which he (Alfred) now required: but a second thought reminded him that such a proceeding was altogether contrary to the lawyer's habit. He accordingly resolved to pick the locks of all the japanned cases in the office, until he should either find the deeds he wanted, or else ascertain that they were not there;—and to work he went, aided by a few little implements which he took from his pocket.

There were altogether about twenty tin boxes in the room, some of them bearing the names of clients, others having no names upon them at all. That of Montgomery did not appear upon any one;—and therefore the youth commenced with the cases which had nothing in the form of nomenclature or initials painted on them. His search was speedily crowned with success; and the coveted documents fell into his hands!

Yes—they were those which he required,—those which he had been instructed to procure,—those, indeed, to which he had heard Caroline Walters so especially allude in the morning!

And now, securing them about his person, the youth hastily quitted the offices, fastening only the outer door, and leaving the key in the lock. He then made the best of his way to Horslydown; and at about half-past ten o'clock, he reached that noted pandemonium—the Beggar's Staff.

The welcome which Alfred received at the hands of Carrotty Poll and the Gallows' Widow, was of the most cordial description. They literally hugged and kissed him in the exuberance of their joy; and Elizabeth Marks assuredly evinced a degree of excitement which was altogether unusual with her.

"Well, this is the finest and most admirable stroke of policy that ever was executed!" she cried, as she glanced at the deeds which Alfred deposited upon the table. "Florimel will reward us munificently!"

"To be sure," observed Carrotty Poll, as she produced a bottle of wine upon the strength of the hoped-for recompense. "Now, take a glass, Alfred—and then tell us how you managed it."

"I suppose you received my note, old gal?" said the youth, whose meekness of manner and humility of tone had apparently been left behind him at the lawyer's office, for the atmosphere of which they had been so successfully assumed.

"Yes—we got the letter, Alf," replied Poll; "and overjoyed we were. Only we had our misgivings, lest you should fail at the very last—or be detected——"

"What a cursed spooney you must take me for," exclaimed the youth, flinging one arm round Carrotty Poll's neck, and the other round the Gallows' Widow's. "No—no: I played my cards better than that, I can tell you. Old Rigden is as cunning as a fox—and I fancied that he looked queer at me once or twice during the day. But never before had he entertained the least suspicion that I wasn't all right—even if he did up to the very last moment."

"And how came you to discover the deeds today?" demanded Poll.

"Oh! a young fellow came — a midshipman-looking chap—to see the guv'ner," replied Alfred; "and I happened to go into the inner office with a message, just at the moment that the visitor said, *'I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you.'* So then I ascertained for the first time that the papers *were* there; and I do believe that the young middy noticed the satisfaction which I felt burning as it were upon my face. Having once made sure of the grand point which I had been endeavouring to arrive at from the very first moment I entered Rigden's service, I knew that the rest was plain-sailing. So I seized an opportunity to write you off a note; and, in a word, I have fulfilled my mission."

"Ah! see what it is to have nice-mannered and well educated young gents like you enlisted in our service," said Carrotty Poll. "If you'd never run away from school and fallen in with the Kinchin-Grand, you wouldn't have performed this glorious feat, you see—and you certainly wouldn't have earned the twenty guineas I promised you."

"And which you may now pay me, Poll," exclaimed the youth: "for I mean to have a regular lark along with the Kinchin-Grand until it is all gone—and then you must find me something else to do."

"To be sure!" returned the Big Beggarman's daughter. "But you must remain very quiet for a few days, Alf, for fear Rigden should raise the hue and cry and advertise the job. You shall however have your money at once—because fair play is fair play."

"Ah! that's true enough," observed the young spark, as he consigned to his pocket the twenty guineas which Carrotty Poll forthwith counted down upon the table.

"And now let us lock up these deeds for to-night," said the Gallows' Widow: "and to-morrow morning early we'll call at Lord Florimel's and see if he has come back to town. If not, we'll post down to Dover and see him there."

CHAPTER CCXIII.

THE RECONCILIATION.

Once more do we find the sisters Octavia and Pauline reunited. In pursuance of the hint which she had received from the Kinchin-Grand, relative to the mode of effecting Octavia's liberation from the madhouse, Pauline had proceeded thither and demanded an interview with Dr. Burton, the proprietor of the asylum. To this individual the courageous and intrepid young lady had declared her resolution of at once applying to a magistrate unless her sister was released without a moment's delay; and the doctor, trembling at the prospect of exposure, and perceiving that Pauline was aware of the foul conspiracy of which Octavia was the victim, not only hastened to submit to her demand, but besought her in the most grovelling terms to pardon him for the share he had taken in the matter. Pauline was too much delighted at the restoration of her sister to freedom, not to deal mercifully with the suppliant doctor; and moreover, it was altogether foreign to her wishes to adopt any measure that was calculated to give publicity to Octavia's disgrace.

The sisters, then, were reunited after a cruel separation of a month and upwards; and the tranquillity of a few days' enjoyment of home, together with the affectionate ministrations and tender endearments lavished upon her by Pauline, again worked a striking and manifest improvement in the mental condition of Octavia. Still, however, did her countenance wear an expression of settled melancholy; and still was there an occasional vacancy in her looks, as if her memory failed her at intervals or grew cloudy and bewildered as she sought to fix her ideas upon some special point.

It was about noon—on the day following the occurrences related in the four preceding chapters—and the sisters were seated in their handsomely-furnished parlour. Octavia was half reclining upon the sofa—Pauline occupied a chair near the window, and was working. The former was gazing intently upon a sprig of lilac which she held in her fair hand, and was weaving with her somewhat confused thoughts the associations which the flower conjured up relative to the blooming of fond hopes to-day and their withering to-morrow;—while the younger sister was thinking of Lord Florimel and marvelling uneasily why he had not answered the letter which she had written to him a few days previously to Dover.

Suddenly the gate of the little garden in front of the house creaked upon its hinges; and the look which Pauline flung forth, encountered the glance of Lord Florimel. Rapture, hope, and suspense were depicted upon his features: but the colour instantaneously fled from the cheeks of Pauline and a sensation of dizziness came over her—for now that the moment so anxiously expected had arrived and they were about to meet again, she knew not how to receive him. The whole details of the masquerade scene came back, vivid in colouring and poignant in effect, to her memory: she still believed in his perfidy—and yet she felt that she must yield him her forgiveness!

The double knock at the door resounded through the house: and Octavia started nervously.

"Oh! if that were the Prince, come to implore my pardon!" she exclaimed, trembling all over with the fever of excitement.

"No—my dearest sister—that will never happen—and you are wrong to indulge the hope, poor girl!" said Pauline. "But if it were ——"

"Then I would forgive him!" ejaculated Octavia, with impassioned accent.

It appeared as if an angel's voice had suddenly answered, by means of Octavia's lips, the question which Pauline was mooting in the recesses of her own heart with regard to Florimel; and the thought flashed to her mind in a moment, that if her sister who was so deeply injured would forgive the author of her wrongs, it was assuredly incumbent upon herself to pardon the comparatively venial offences of which Florimel had been guilty towards her.

With the speed of lightning did this reflection traverse her imagination;—and the next moment the handsome and graceful Gabriel burst into the room. The impulse which urged Pauline at the instant was entirely in his favour: the frank and ingenuous remark of Octavia had dispelled all hesitation on the side of the young maiden—and the lovers precipitated themselves into each other's arms.

"Dearest, dearest Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel: "at length we meet again!"

"And the past is forgotten, Gabriel," murmured the young lady, as she gave back the joyous and enraptured kisses which the nobleman imprinted upon her lips, her cheeks, and her brow.

Octavia clasped her hands together fervently, and the tears ran down her cheeks: but it was through joy—through emotions of gladness at the spectacle of her sister's happiness,—and this was the first real gleam of sunshine that had dawned upon the soul of the unfortunate young lady since the dreadful day on which the full measure of the Prince's perfidy became known to her.

When the first ebullition of feeling on the part of Florimel and Pauline was over, the nobleman paid his respects to Octavia, whom he treated with the affectionate interest and kind sympathy which a brother would devote to a cherished but afflicted sister: then, seating himself by the side of Pauline, he took her hand—pressed it to his lips—and

gazed long and tenderly upon her charming countenance.

"Oh! my beloved," he whispered at length in her ear, "there have been sad and dreadful misunderstandings between us: but let them be all cleared up now, and then forgotten for ever. They told me that you were married—that the account of your wedding was in the newspaper——"

"Who could possibly have deceived you thus, Gabriel?" inquired Pauline, amazed at the announcement thus made her.

"A person who was interested in deluding and persecuting me, my angel," answered the young nobleman: and as he still gazed on the lovely features of Pauline, he wondered how he could ever have been mad, base, and besotted enough to have dreamt of sacrificing the amiable virgin for the unknown woman of gallantry and pleasure. "But tell me, my charmer—tell me, my adored one—wherefore you so suddenly broke off everything between us?"

"Does not your own conscience answer the question, Gabriel?" said Pauline, in a low tone of upbraiding, while her countenance suddenly became serious and mournful. "Ah! I have consented to forgive you this once—for the last time:—but do not affect ignorance, instead of manifesting contrition!"

"Pauline," replied the young nobleman, with the impassioned accents and fervid manner of unmistakable sincerity, "your words are but a continuation of that dreadful enigma which has so much perplexed me and almost driven me to despair. If I have erred *since* that day on which you wrote to tell me that everything was at an end between us, my offence must be looked upon with a compassionate consideration, because your own inexplicable conduct was but too well calculated to plunge me into any excesses that might divert my mind from pondering on its blasted hopes and its stricken affections. But until that letter came, I take God to witness that I was true and faithful in word and deed unto you——"

"O Gabriel! add not this perjury to your other offences," exclaimed Pauline, emphatically: "or I shall withdraw my promise of pardon—I shall refuse all reconciliation!"

"Then, in the name of God! explain yourself," cried Florimel, with a vehemence equally impassioned,—"in order that I may enter upon my justification! You cannot, at least, refuse me that demand?"

"One word will suffice, Gabriel," said Pauline, in a tone profoundly mournful: then, in a scarcely audible whisper, she added, "I fancied that you could not have been at a loss to conjecture who the Flower Girl was at the Masquerade."

"By heaven! this enigma is intolerable—this mystery is more than I can endure!" exclaimed the young nobleman, completely bewildered. "Ah! I recollect," he cried, as a sudden reminiscence struck him: "I *was* invited to a masquerade at Covent Garden theatre—but I take God to witness that I did not go!"

"Then has there been some foul treachery played upon me!" said Pauline, staggered and confounded by the air of sincerity and the tone of confidence with which her lover's denial was given. "And, to speak candidly," she continued, in a musing tone, "I was struck *then*—at the time—by the circumstance that the masque in the blue domino with the braiding and the star, was taller than you——"

"A blue domino—braiding—and star!" ejaculated Florimel, now more bewildered and mystified than ever. "Yes—I know of such a domino—it was sent to me—but I commanded my page to destroy it! Oh! I begin to see through all this hideous misunderstanding," he cried, suddenly struck by the conviction that some dark scheme of treachery, unsuspected by him until this very moment, had been pepetrated by Rao—*alias* Caroline Walters—through the agency of the blue domino. "Perhaps it was not destroyed after all—and another person may have used it——"

"Oh! if such were indeed the case, Florimel," interrupted Pauline, now dreadfully agitated,—"then have I done you a cruel injustice—wronged you by the vilest suspicions—and behaved towards you with a precipitation and an inconsiderateness which you can never overlook!"

"Never overlook!" repeated Gabriel, in an impassioned tone. "There is nothing you can do towards me, beloved Pauline, that I am not prepared to pardon—because I have so much for which to ask forgiveness of you!"

And the young nobleman sank upon his knees at her feet.

"Rise—Oh! rise, my well-beloved Gabriel!" exclaimed the beauteous virgin, starting from her seat, a prey to the wildest agitation: then, as she abandoned her hand to the nobleman who still knelt before her, she said with exceeding bitterness of tone, "Ah! I was too hasty—yes, too precipitate: and I was sealing my own unhappiness at the same time that I was causing yours. But you will forgive me, Gabriel—you will forgive me——"

"Oh! let us grant mutual pardon, my angel—my beauty—my adored!" cried Florimel, springing from his suppliant position and snatching the heavenly being to his breast.

"Yes—pardon each other, whatever ills you may have done," said Octavia, rising from the sofa, and approaching the tender pair: then suddenly bursting into tears, she cried, "Oh! that the false Prince would come and demand pardon of *me*!"

Pauline and Gabriel now devoted themselves to the task of soothing Octavia's abruptly awakened grief; and leading her back to the sofa, they said all they could to afford her solace and sympathy. In a few minutes they succeeded in calming the afflicted young lady;—and when they saw that the violence of the storm had thus passed, they returned to the seats which they had previously occupied at the other end of the room.

"And now, my Pauline," said Lord Florimel, "will you explain to me all that is still bewildering and mysterious to me, relative to the blue domino?"

"Read this letter," observed the younger Miss Clarendon, producing the document from a desk which stood upon a table close by; "and you will then judge what my feelings must have been."

"Ah! it is as I thought!" ejaculated the nobleman, instantaneously recognising the handwriting of Caroline Walters.

He then ran his eyes hastily over the contents of the letter, which has already been given in the hundred and forty-ninth chapter of our narrative,

but which we shall reproduce in this place, as the precise terms in which it was worded may have escaped the memory of the reader :—

"Lord Florimel is unfaithful to you. While affecting a complete reformation in his conduct, his private life is as profligate as ever; but his intrigues are carried on with a greater circumspection. To-morrow night he will be present at a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, disguised in a blue domino edged with a peculiar braiding and having a star of the same material on the top or crown of the hood. The object of his visit to that scene is a new love-intrigue; and you may convince yourself with your own eyes that such is the fact The writer of this note is animated by no other desire than a sincere wish to prevent so much virtue, generous confidence, amiability, and candour being sacrificed to such profound hypocrisy, such foul deceit, and such unpardonable treachery: for by all *those* virtues are you characterised—and by all *these* faults is Lord Florimel distinguished.

"Well aware that you are so utterly unacquainted with all the arts of London dissipation, as to be ignorant even how to proceed in order to procure at so short a notice a suitable disguise for the purpose which this letter naturally suggests, the writer has made the necessary arrangements at a respectable fancy-dress warehouse in London (the card of which is enclosed). The mistress of the establishment will have a chamber prepared for you to perform your toilette in the strictest privacy; and you can proceed thence in a hackney-coach to the theatre, which is at no great distance from the warehouse.

"One word more. The writer positively and earnestly enjoins you not to address a syllable of reproach to Lord Florimel within the walls of the theatre. You are even forbidden to accost him in a manner that may enable him to guess who you are. On the contrary, you must restrain your feelings and take time to deliberate upon the proper course to be subsequently pursued."

"That last paragraph, Pauline," exclaimed Lord Florimel, indignantly, when he had terminated the perusal of the letter, "must serve to convince you that I was *not* the wearer of the blue domino at the masquerade. Read it—examine it thoroughly: see how carefully it is worded—and how energetic is the caution that it conveys! Why were you not to address the wearer of the blue domino in a manner that would provoke reply? Because any conversation that might have occurred between you, would have led to the discovery that a scandalous trick had been practised upon you and that I was *not* the masque whom you accosted."

"Yes—the truth is apparent *now*, Gabriel," said Pauline, fixing her eyes tenderly upon her lover: "and again do I implore your pardon for the readiness with which I yielded to the suspicions so wickedly excited and so artfully maintained. And now that I bethink me, there was a female masque, disguised as a Gipsy, who accosted me on that memorable evening and avowed the authorship of the anonymous letter. I questioned her concerning the motive which had induced her to warn me against holding any discourse with the Blue Domino; and I remember that her tone was ferocious, vindictive, and malignant in the extreme, as she replied that those were *her* secrets! Moreover, it was she herself who deliberately suggested the very terms in which I ought to convey to you the intimation that everything was at an end between us."

"The wretch!" murmured Florimel, between his set teeth. "But did you catch a glimpse of her countenance?" he inquired.

"I noticed that she had fine dark eyes, which flashed through the holes of her mask," said Pauline,—"brilliant teeth and black hair. Her stature was short; but she was gracefully formed—and she was evidently quite young."

"Enough!" exclaimed Florimel: "'tis she—the unfortunate girl——and I merited all her vindictiveness! But once more do I fall upon my knees in your presence, Pauline," he cried in an impassioned tone; "and never shall I rise until I have confessed my errors—my misdeeds—and received your full pardon!"

"No, Gabriel—you shall make no confession to me!" exclaimed the generous hearted Pauline. "Rise—I will not listen to one word of self-crimiuation from your lips. I have been harsh—precipitate—unkind towards you in one respect; and you have forgiven me. Shall I be less considerate on your behalf? Besides, I can already divine the truth in reference to the vindictive young woman who achieved so much mischief and who personated the Gipsy at the masquerade. She was doubtless one who has good cause to deplore a broken pledge on your part;—and it will now be our duty to seek her—console and propitiate her—and ensure her a competency, if she be poor, for the remainder of her days."

"Ah! you know not of whom you are speaking, Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel. "Do you remember the dreadful murder that was committed in Lambeth some two or three months back? Well, that same Caroline Walters—the murderess—is the young woman whom you would console and propitiate—and she was arrested last evening!"

"Oh! the unhappy girl!" cried Pauline, clasping her hands and shuddering visibly. "And that infamous woman—the milliner of Pall Mall—was also taken into custody, I have heard—charged with crimes that are almost incredible——"

"But which appear, notwithstanding, to be conclusively brought home to her," added Florimel. "Let us not, however, devote a word or a thought to any one or anything, unless connected with our own affairs—for *these* must now be the all-engrossing topic. Yes, Pauline," continued the young nobleman, still remaining upon his knees before her, and speaking in a voice of the deepest contrition,—"I betrayed that young girl—that Caroline Walters——and hence the fearful revenge which she has sought to wreak upon me, by alienating your affections from me for ever! It is true that she became my victim before I was even acquainted with you: but can you—will you bestow your hand on one who has erred so deeply as I?"

"The candour of this confession, Gabriel, permits me not to hesitate a moment how to answer you," said Pauline. "Oh! surely, surely you are repentant for the past——"

"God knows how penitent I am!" ejaculated the young nobleman, fervidly. "But it is for you, Pauline, to become my guardian angel—my saving genius; and I will reward you with a love as unbounded and a fidelity as true as your virtues merit!"

"Rise—rise, my Gabriel—and be happy!" exclaimed Pauline, forcing the young nobleman to abandon his suppliant posture. "There—seat yourself by my side—and let me hear you converse without an excitement that is painful to us both. The past cannot be recalled—but it may be atoned

for, perhaps;—and contrition is the first step towards expiation."

"You are an angel, Pauline!" cried Florimel, straining the lovely girl to his breast. "But you little know what remarkable vicissitudes I have experienced since last we met. Disguised as a black page, did Caroline Walters enter my service, with a view to achieve my ruin by any means that should present themselves or under any circumstances that might arise to favour her designs. Thus was it that she was enabled to purloin from me certain documents, the loss of which menaced my peerage and my fortune. But the papers were restored to me this morning, Pauline—and I can still place a coronet upon thy brow and make thee the sharer of my wealth! And this reminds me that the persons through whose agency I regained possession of my deeds, are the same who delivered you the other day from the power of that vilest of miscreants—the Prince of Wales. Yes—I have this morning heard all that happened beneath the roof of your treacherous neighbours, the Pages;—and you may readily imagine how great was my surprise—how infinite my joy, when I learnt that you were residing once more in the very dwelling where we first became acquainted. I lost no time in coming hither, Pauline: and the hopes which animated me, have not been disappointed—— for, heaven be praised! we are reconciled once more!"

"And it shall be your fault, my Gabriel, if any farther misunderstanding takes place between us," said Pauline, bending her beauteous eyes affectionately upon her lover's handsome countenance: "for, on my part, I can securely promise that never again will I yield to unconfirmed suspicions or presumptive evidence——"

"Oh! the noblest feelings are of a jealous nature, my Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel; "and unless you had loved me tenderly you would not have resented my supposed infidelity severely."

"I am grateful to thee, Gabriel," whispered Pauline, "for thus finding an extenuation for my injurious, rash, and precipitate conduct towards thee. But tell me—who could that individual have been who wore the blue domino and personated yourself at the masquerade?"

"Doubtless some accomplice in Caroline Walters' scheme of revenge," replied Florimel. "And now let us avert our eyes as much as possible from the past, and think only of the present—yes, and of the future also," he added, pressing the maiden's hand to his lips. "It is for you, Pauline," he continued, in a low and tender tone, "to settle the day which will render us both happy—unite us, never more to separate—and, while bestowing upon me a husband's right to protect and cherish you, afford me also a brother's privilege to watch over and console your afflicted and deeply-wronged sister."

Then, with melting looks and blushing cheeks, the charming maiden murmured a few words in her lover's ear;—and doubtless the response which they conveyed to his solicitation was agreeable to his hopes and wishes—for he once more caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and covered her cheeks with kisses.

CHAPTER CCXIV.

AN EXPLOSION AMONGST THE NEW LIGHTS.

While the preceding scene was taking place at the corner house in the genteel little row known as Paradise Villas, the occupants of the dwelling a couple of doors off were playing their part in a somewhat less agreeable drama at the Police Court in Bow Street, Covent Garden.

The reader has probably borne in mind the circumstance that when Mr. Page introduced himself on the first occasion to Carlton Palace, he informed the Prince of Wales that, on taking a house in Paradise Villas, he found out that the Honourable Misses Clarendon dwelt on one side, and the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby on the other side of his new abode.

Such was indeed the fact: for the esteemed and estimable pastor of the New Lights, accompanied by his admired and admirable friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, had transferred their quarters from the establishment of Mrs. Piggleberry in Jermyn Street to the beautiful suburban villa aforesaid. The worthy dame was of course well aware that these chosen vessels had thus removed to the Edgeware Road, inasmuch as she had given them a highly satisfactory character when referred to by the landlord of their new tenement: but she was *not* equally well informed in respect to the fact that they had enticed her niece, the pretty Ann Jones, to follow them secretly thither and undertake the duties of housekeeper. In plain terms, the niece was found to be missing a few days after the removal of the pious gentlemen; and her parents, from whose home she had fled, together with her aunt, at whose house she had been a constant visitress, were overwhelmed with sorrow and cruelly perplexed at her sudden disappearance.

Indeed, there was some cause for suspecting that the young woman had experienced foul play; inasmuch as, at the period of her flight, she was passing a few days with her aunt, by whom she was sent out to liquidate some little accounts that were owing in the neighbourhood, and for which purpose a ten-pound note was given to her. But she never returned; and, on subsequent inquiry, it proved that she had not paid the debts at all, nor even visited the shops where the accounts were owing. She had been home to her parents' abode for a few minutes, to put on her best clothes and procure her father's umbrella: but from the moment she started forth again, all trace was lost of her. Her father, mother, and aunt had therefore naturally experienced much alarm and uneasiness on her account; and all the researches and inquiries which they set afoot proved unavailing. The neighbours shook their heads and observed significantly that "Miss Ann was a pretty girl, and she knew it:" some added that "she was a thorough coquette and given to fine dressing lately;"—and others ventured to prophecy that "she would come back again when she wanted the widwife's assistance." But her parents and aunt turned a deaf ear to these remarks: they could not possibly think that Ann had gone astray after becoming a member of the New Lights: nor did it for a moment strike these worthy people that she had been allured away by the odour of sanctity which attended like a halo upon the persons of the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby and Brother Paxwax.

Thus several weeks had passed, during which Ann Jones was pleasantly and comfortably employed in discharging the duties of housekeeper at the new dwelling where the chosen vessels had established themselves in Paradise Villas. But it happened at last—indeed, early in the very morning of the day on which Florimel and Pauline were reunited—that Mr. Jones, Ann's respected father and consequently Mrs. Piggleberry's beloved brother, was passing along the Edgeware Road,—when, to his infinite surprise, he beheld his daughter taking in the hot rolls at Mr. Sneaksby's front door! The ejaculation of wonder which burst from his lips at this discovery, met the ears of Miss Ann Jones; and, instantaneously recognising her sire, she dropped the rolls as if they were scorpions—stepped back into the house—and slammed the door in the face of the astonished baker, who naturally thought that the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby's confidential domestic had suddenly gone mad.

But Mr. Jones, to whose comprehension all the perfidy of the pious gentlemen suddenly became clear and apparent as day-light, was resolved to recover his daughter: and rushing up the steps, he began to knock furiously at the front-door. For some time no regard was paid to his noisy summons: and therefore he continued to knock, and, knock, as if inspired with a determination to break in the door on the one hand and arouse the whole neighbourhood on the other. Doubtless both these catastrophes were at last apprehended by the inmates of the house; and they therefore thought it prudent to capitulate. Accordingly, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax opened the door and besought Mr. Jones to step in and "settle the matter amicably:" but Mr. Jones being a very passionate individual, was not to be soothed or coaxed by the bland appeal of the chosen vessel. He therefore preferred taking his stand on the threshold, and bawling out to his daughter to come forth from "that den of hypo-

crisy." Awfully scandalised at this proceeding, Brother Paxwax used every endeavour to pacify the irate Mr. Jones: but Mr. Jones was not to be pacified at any price short of the surrender of his daughter—and as this consummation did not appear to be nigh at hand, he continued to bawl and vociferate more lustily than ever. The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby accordingly came forth to see what effect *his* eloquence would have in the matter: and he began by denying in the most positive terms that Ann Jones was in his house at all, alleging that he certainly possessed a maid-servant very much like her, but whose name was Mary Smith. For a few moments Mr. Jones was staggered, and really began to think it just possible that he had made a mistake: but all on a sudden he caught sight of an umbrella—*his own umbrella*—which he instantaneously recognised as the one that his daughter had taken away with her on the day of her disappearance. Bounding into the passage like an infuriate bull-dog, Mr. Jones seized upon the umbrella, and therewith set to work to belabour the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby so unmercifully, that the pious vessel was covered all over with bruises before he had even time to raise an arm in self-defence. Mr. Paxwax roared out "Murder!"—and Mr. Sneaksby vociferated "Fire!" or anything else that came to the tip of his tongue. Then, in the midst of the fracas, Ann Jones—the fair, but frail Ann Jones herself—emerged, shrieking and screaming, from the back parlour: the whole neighbourhood was alarmed—the constables were sent for—and the upshot was that Mr. Jones, his daughter, and the two influential leaders of the New Lights, together with the umbrella, were all ignominiously bundled into a hackney-coach which was passing at the time, and in this manner duly conveyed to Bow Street.

Immediately upon their arrival at the police-office, Mr. Jones despatched a messenger to Jermyn Street, to inform Mrs. Piggleberry of what had occurred and obtain her attendance at the forthcoming examination; and the case was accordingly kept back until the worthy woman's arrival. The parties were then introduced to the notice of the magistrate; and a very singular appearance they made.

In the first place the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby put on his longest, demurest, and most puritanically miserable look,—screwing up his mouth, and yet drawing down his chin at the same time—an operation which only gentlemen of his class can ever hope to succeed in accomplishing. Secondly, that excellent creature Brother Paxwax assumed a demeanour so resigned and so expressive of injured innocence, that had it not seemed most sublimely ridiculous in connexion with his rubicund countenance and brandy-loving looks, it doubtless would have produced the desired effect. Thirdly, there was Mr. Jones, with a fierce aspect and a stern demeanour, ready to pitch into anybody or everybody at the slightest provocation, and bestowing irate glances upon the pious vessels and his frail daughter by turns. Fourthly, there was the young female herself—abashed, trembling, and looking as if she entertained a vague apprehension of speedily becoming better acquainted with Bridewell than she as yet was. Lastly, we must observe that poor Mrs. Piggleberry, standing apart from the rest, appeared the very picture of woe and seemed intent on the process of inflaming her right eye with the corner of her apron.

The two leaders of the New Lights, Mr. Jones, and his daughter, were all placed at the bar, charged with fighting, creating a disturbance, and alarming the neighbourhood in which the occurrence took place: but the magistrate had not entered very far into an investigation of the affair, before he obtained sufficient insight into its origin and nature to determine him to dismiss the charge and place the whole ground-work of the proceedings upon another footing.

"Now, Mr. Jones," he said, "you complain that Nathaniel Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax have enticed your daughter away from home—is it not so?"

"Yes, your worship," replied the individual thus addressed: "and if that isn't a reason why I should punch their heads——"

"Hush! hush!" ejaculated the magistrate: "we know nothing of punching heads here—or rather, we know too much of it in the cases that come before us. But what age is your daughter, Mr Jones?"

"Turned of twenty, your worship," was the answer: "and if that isn't an age when she ought to know better, I'm cursed if I——"

"Hush! hush!" interposed the functionary on the bench. "You must not make use of such language, or I shall fine you five shillings. I want to do you justice—for I see that you have been ill-treated: but you should curb your temper."

"The man of Belial!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, first bending his eyes with an expression of sorrowful reproach upon Mr. Jones, and then turning up the said eyes like a duck in a thunder-storm.

"The man of wrath!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, imitating his reverend leader as much as possible, alike in tone and looks.

"Silence!" exclaimed the usher of the court, sharply.

"What saith that Philistine, Brother Paxwax?" asked Mr. Sneaksby, assuming the martyrized air of a saint.

"That we must bridle our tongues, Brother Sneaksby," was the lugubrious response.

"Silence!" once more ejaculated the usher.

"Please your washup," observed Mrs. Piggleberry, imagining that this was the very best time for her to state what she knew of the matter,—"them two unsavoury wessels has debauched and ruinated the poor gal which I loved as well as if she was my own mother—leastways, my darter, I should say——"

"Oh! aunt," exclaimed Miss Ann Jones, under the impression that she could do nothing better than get up a little scene, and perhaps go into hysterics by way of a finale,—"I know that I've been very ungrateful — very undu-u-tiful to both fa-a-ther and yourself elf," she continued in a whimpering tone; "but it was all along of that tall hypocrite there——"

"Sister Ann, sister Ann!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of mild rebuke, as the girl pointed her left hand towards him while she held her apron up to her eyes with her right. "Have I not been even as a brother unto thee——"

"Yea, verily—and as a husband too," added Mr. Paxwax, thinking to aid his leader's cause by the remark.

"I've not the slightest doubt about it," observed

the magistrate, drily. "But this young woman is twenty years of age, and therefore able to take care of herself. The charge of abduction will not stand; and unless you can show me, Mr. Jones, that when your daughter was enticed away, she took some of your property with her, and that such property is now beneath the roof of these persons——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Jones. "My umbrella——"

"And my ten-pound note!" exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry.

"Oh! the filthy lucre!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, raising his eyes and hands, as if in appeal to heaven.

"Oh! the base cotton umbrella!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, in the deep trouble of his spirit.

"Yes—but we must hear a little more of these things," said the magistrate, who was evidently bent upon punishing the New Light leaders if he possibly could manage it. "And first about the ten-pound note, as that is the most serious?"

"Well, sir, I'll confess everything—please, sir—that I will—if you won't hurt me," exclaimed Ann Jones, now crying in bitter reality—for she saw that the affair was every instant becoming more and more serious.

"That's right—tell the truth, gal," said Mrs. Piggleberry; "and his washup won't do you no harm."

"Oh! aunt," cried the young woman, reproachfully, "it was all your fault that ever I went among them New Lights—and you've brought me to this," she added, sobbing grievously.

"Cuss the New Lights!" ejaculated Mrs. Piggleberry, darting furious glances at Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax, who stood gazing upon the magistrate with the meek and sanctimonious air of outraged innocence resigned to all its wrongs.

"Now if all this isn't a reason," exclaimed Mr. Jones, who was very fond of introducing his remarks in those terms, "to make one ready to knock these fellows' heads together——"

"Hush! we can have no knocking of heads here!" cried the magistrate. "Now, madam," he continued, turning towards Mrs. Piggleberry; "tell me about that ten-pound note."

"I will, sir—and I won't deceive you," said the good woman, with a curtsey. "Please your worship, I'm a respectable widder which rents a house in Jermyn Street, and pays rent and taxes as reglar as quarter-days and collectors comes round. I gets my living by lodgings—leastways, by taking in gentlemen and doing for them—which is the way I come to have them sneaking waggabones a-living in my house and okkipying rooms that I might have let to their betters. But I've found 'em out now, the canting humbugs!"

"The poor benighted creature is in wrath," moaned Mr. Sneaksby.

"And, verily, she revileth us," groaned Mr. Paxwax.

"We are in the hands of the ungodly, brother," sighed his Reverence.

"Yea—in the power of the men of Belial," gasped Ichabod.

"Forty stripes save one shalt thou have on thine hide, friend Paxwax," whispered the former.

"And a night and a day shalt thou sit in the stocks, friend Sneaksby," murmured the latter.

"Come—cease that talking!" cried the magistrate. "And now about this ten-pound note?"

"Please your washup," resumed Mrs. Piggleberry, with another curtsey, "I'll tell the truth. It was a new note—bran new, as one may say—not a bit soiled in any one place, and crisp-like to the touch. Well, your washup, I gives it to my niece there; and, '*Ann*,' I says, says I, '*you'll just step round to the tradesmen and pay the week's bills*,' says I.—'*Yes, aunt*,' she says, says she, '*I will*.'—'*Do, Ann*,' says I; and I gives her the ten-pound note. Away she trots; and I goes down into the kitchen to cook some liver and bacon for my dinner—for I'm exceedin' fond of liver and bacon, your washup—besides its being cheap——"

"The flesh-pots of Egypt," groaned Mr. Sneaksby, smacking his lips.

"A savoury mess, such as Ichabod loveth," moaned Mr. Paxwax.

"But I always puts an ing'un into the gravy, please your washup," continued Mrs. Piggleberry; "and if your washup will only tell your cook the next time——"

"The ten-pound note!" exclaimed the magistrate, impatiently. "This is not a case of liver and bacon, my good woman."

"No more it isn't," said Mrs. Peggleberry, seriously; though with a dubious look and mystic shake of her head, as if she were not quite sure that the dish in question had not something to do with the matter. "Well, your washup, I gave the girl the ten-pound note——"

"And I gave it to Mr. Sne-eaks-by," said Ann Jones, whimpering. "It was agreed that I should leave home and go and live at his new house after a little while: but I wasn't to follow him directly, for fear that mother and father and aunt should suspect where I'd gone. But when I got the ten pounds, I thought it was the best time to go to him—as I could keep the money to buy clothes with. But I didn't buy clothes—for Mr. Sneaksby was very short at the time, and when he knew that I had the note he asked me to give it to him. He said the Lord had need of it."

"Oh, Ann, thou canst not say that I took thy shekels of gold!" observed the reverend gentleman, with a solemn shake of the head, and an awful elongation of the countenance.

"Nor the shekels of silver," added Paxwax, in a sombre tone.

"Yes, you did, though," cried Ann, tartly: "and you both got so tipsy the same night, that I was ashamed of you. But these two fellows, your worship, were always drinking; and they sometimes used me very badly. I should have run away from them, only I'd no place to go to; for I didn't dare return home. And now that everything has come out at last, I don't mind telling all I know of them. They're a scandalous pair of impostors, and that's what they are!" added Miss Jones, working herself up into a fury.

"Sister Ann, sister Ann!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, shaking his forefinger at the young woman; "thou wilt repent of this ingratitude to one who hath been a kind master and a loving brother unto thee!"

"Oh! do send him to prison, your worship," cried the girl, whimpering once more; "for he seduced me, he did; he made me go astray; and if father will take me home again, I'll be good and steady in future."

"Well, young woman," remarked the magistrate, "we shall see what your father says presently. And now answer me one or two questions. Did Sneaksby know how you came by the ten pounds that you gave him?"

"To be sure he did, your worship," was the reply. "I told him that aunt gave it to me, and he said the Lord had need of it. So I handed it over to him. He'd such power over me then, he had!"

"And has he ever paid you any portion of it back again?" inquired the magistrate.

"Not a farthing, your worship,—although he's had plenty of money since, from Salem and other places. And, what's more, the New Lights are building him and Brother Paxwax both beautiful houses ——"

"If this isn't a reason to make your worship send these rascals to prison, I'll be hanged if I know what would," exclaimed Mr. Jones. "As for my daughter, I'll take her home again and forgive her this time——"

"And I won't do it no more, father," cried Ann, turning in an appealing manner towards her parent. "But will mother forgive me?"

"Yes, yes—it shall be all right," answered her father.

"Come, don't cry, my love," whispered Mrs. Piggleberry, in a soothing tone. "I know it was all my fault for taking you to Salem and throwing you in the way of them New Lights. A precious state of grease they've brought you to after all."

"Now, one more question, young woman," said the magistrate. "Was the prisoner Paxwax cognisant of the affair of the ten-pound note?"

"He knew all about it, your worship," replied Ann Jones; "in fact, it was him that went and changed it the moment I gave it to them."

"That will do," observed the magistrate; "we need not go into the case of the umbrella. Now, prisoners, what have you to say in your defence?"

"Verily, the young woman hath spoken falsely," said the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby, in his habitual canting drone; "and thou, O righteous judge! wilt not be swayed by Satan to do evil unto me. Never received I aught from the young woman; neither shekels of gold, nor shekels of silver; and as toucheth her chastity, if she be not a virgin, of a surety it is not I that have defiled her. I took her as mine handmaiden, to serve and minister unto me, at a wage of three pounds for each fourth part of a year. And forasmuch as she hath not yet tarried with me so long a period as three months, verily is her wage not due till the term cometh. She is wroth against me, because I have rebuked her for her too great forwardness touching a certain ungodly vessel whom men do call the pot-boy at the public-house which is nearest unto my abode. But I yield her my forgiveness: nay, more—I will even pay her her wage, albeit though not yet due——and I will send for Brother Unthank Snag and Brother Crick, and bid them come with money in their hands that they may present unto this widow the ten shekels which her niece did take from her. This will I do, thou interpreter of the law!" added Mr. Sneakshy, apostrophizing the magistrate; "so that there may be peace between us and I may gird up my loins and depart!"

"Amen!" said Ichabod Paxwax, in a deep solemn tone.

"Have you anything to urge in your own behalf?" demanded the magistrate of this latter individual.

"I have said it," was the response.

"Then shall I proceed to adjudicate summarily in this matter," continued the magistrate. "It is through the vile hypocrisy, the wretched cant, and the foul immoralities of such men as yourselves, that the cause of true religion is injured. I care not whether an individual be a member of the Established Church, a Dissenter, or a Catholic: so long as he is sincere, honest, and true in his professions and his practice, he is worthy of esteem and respect. Indeed, I am well aware that taking the whole body of Dissenters generally, they are in every way deserving of admiration and praise. But there are hypocrites, Maw-worms, false prophets, and canting impostors in all sects and all creeds; and under the respectable cloak of Dissent, do cheats and counterfeits like you, prisoners at the bar, succeed in preying upon the credulous and unwary, the weak-minded and the ignorant. Your offence against society is all the greater, because you are the real wolves in sheep's clothing of whom the holy scriptures speak. You assume the most sacred characters, in order to conceal the most depraved courses and the most dissolute lives. Society must be protected against such men—true religion shall not be outraged with impunity. I therefore sentence you each to three months' imprisonment as rogues and vagabonds. Clear the court!"

The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby threw up his arms in dismay, while Brother Paxwax fell on his knees and began to blubber like a school-boy. But the magistrate was inexorable; and the two influential leaders of the New Lights were lugged out of the office and locked up in a cell until all the cases of the day were disposed of. They were then conveyed in a hackney-coach to the House of Correction, where we shall leave them to deplore their unhappy fate and curse the day on which they undertook to bring Ann Jones to a state of grace!

But ere we conclude this chaper we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to declare that, in depicting such characters as Sneaksby and Paxwax, we aim only at exposing the Maw-worms and the hypocritical reprobates who make a trade of religion; and that we have never harboured the slightest intention of ridiculing or maligning the honest, sincere, and conscientious pastors who do their duty to their flock. We are well aware that in the Dissenting Ministry there are thousands of excellent, amiable, and truly pious men; and we therefore delineate Mr. Sneaksby as a type of the *exceptions* to the rule, and not of *the class itself*. We will even declare our positive conviction that for morality, useful learning, and disinterested zeal, the Dissenting Ministers are incomparably superior to the bigotted, narrow-minded, selfish, and dissipated clergy of the Established Church.

CHAPTER CCXV.

AN INTERVIEW IN NEWGATE.

Nearly two months and a half had now elapsed since the Honourable Arthur Eaton was committed to Newgate, to await his trial on the charge of murdering his valet William Dudley.

We must remind our readers that when the investigation of that dark and mysterious tragedy took place at Bow Street, Mr. Eaton addressed the magistrate in the following manner:—"*I can*

only say that I am innocent of this foul deed which is imputed to me. That a tremendous mass of circumstantial evidence has accumulated against me, I readily admit: but there is a key to the reading of this terrible mystery—a clue to the unravelling of this skein of incidents, at present so tangled and so complicated. That is however my secret for the present: useless and unavailing were it to enter upon any explanations at this moment or in this place. No—for a more solemn occasion and a higher tribunal shall be reserved a narrative the details of which will cause every heart to thrill with horror throughout the land, and turn into sympathy and commiseration the loathing and abhorrence which in the meantime may attach themselves unto me." It will be readily understood that Arthur Eaton alluded, in this address, to the bitter persecution which he had experienced at the hands of Fernanda, and every detail of which he purposed to reveal in self-defence at the proper time.

But in those days of which we are writing, the newspapers were of diminutive size, and their reports of cases were necessarily limited and brief. It therefore happened that the whole of Arthur Eaton's address to the magistrate was omitted; and not the slightest reference was made to his declaration that he possessed a key to the reading of the mystery and would give startling explanations when put upon his trial. But the reporters *did* insert the concluding incident of the proceedings at the police-court: namely, that as Arthur Eaton was being led away, the assembled spectators testified their compassion by sundry remarks proving that they looked upon him as a monomaniac swayed by an irresistible instinct for blood.

If such, then, was the impression made upon the minds of the persons who had attended the proceedings and heard the prisoner's address to the magistrate, it cannot be wondered at if the same opinion should be adopted by those who knew nothing more of the matter than what they gleaned from the imperfect reports in the newspapers. In fact, these reports were precisely of a nature to encourage the belief that Arthur Eaton was a monomaniac, and that he had no explanation in reserve nor any defence to offer when the day of trial should come. Such was the general impression upon the public mind: but there were of course a few individuals who thought differently and more profoundly upon the subject. Lord Marchmont, the prisoner's father—for instance—could not possibly imagine that his son was guilty of the crime imputed to him; although the shock occasioned by such a tremendous calamity had thrown the old nobleman on a sick bed and brought him to the very verge of the grave. Then again, there was Pauline Clarendon, who entertained too sublime a confidence not only in the rectitude of her cousin, but likewise in the strength of his mind, to believe for a single moment that he had perpetrated the deed either wilfully or under the influence of a dominant mania. Lord and Lady Holderness had likewise, no doubt, strong opinions upon the same subject: but up to the hour when they encountered Caroline Walters disguised as a midshipman, they had felt convinced that Arthur Eaton must inevitably succumb, on the day of trial, beneath the circumstantial evidence that weighed so tremendously against him.

Nearly two months and a half, we said, had elapsed since the committal of the young gentleman to Newgate. During that period there was one sitting of the criminal tribunal at the Old Bailey: but it followed so closely upon Arthur's consignment to gaol, that his trial was postponed until the ensuing session. In the meantime he recovered somewhat from the dreadful shock which he had experienced on finding that he was regarded as a monomaniac; and during the last two or three weeks of his incarceration, he had long and frequent interviews with his professional adviser. Still, however, was he weighed down by a deep sense of misforture, degradation, and grief: his cheeks had become as pale as they were when he appeared to be perishing beneath the influence of the secret poison—and he felt as if all his vital powers were sapped and undermined beyond all earthly means of restoration.

In such a condition was he,—physically attenuated and morally depressed,—when he was one morning informed by a turnkey that a prisoner who had been committed to Newgate on the previous evening, anxiously and earnestly desired an interview with him. To the questions which Arthur put, the functionary responded that the prisoner alluded to was a certain Caroline Walters—the young woman charged with the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife. With the vividness and celerity of an inspiration did it strike Mr. Eaton that the object of the interview now solicited more or less concerned his own special case:—and yielding at once to the influence of this presentiment, he desired the turnkey to bring the young woman to his cell.

The regulations of the prison were far from being strict or severe in the times of which we are writing; and the liberal fee that Caroline had placed in the turnkey's hands was the incentive to those good offices which he was thus exercising in her behalf. Accordingly, having obtained Arthur Eaton's assent to the demand for an interview, the turnkey hastened to conduct Caroline into the young gentleman's presence.

She was once more habited in the attire which became her sex;—and the moment she entered Eaton's cell, he was struck with the conviction that the mere girl who now stood before him was not likely to be the murderess of the old midwife. But a second and more scrutinising look which he fixed upon her countenance, enabled him to discover an expression of stern resolution in her lineaments; and the thought then arose within him that the strong mind of an experienced woman haply tenanted that form of youthful grace and of winning charms scarcely as yet matured.

The turnkey intimated that he should return again in an hour; and, on leaving the cell, he locked and bolted the door. Arthur rose from his seat—placed a chair for Caroline—and then, resuming his place, anxiously waited for her to explain the purport of her visit.

"Mr. Eaton," she said, in a low but firm and impressive tone, "we have an identity of interests at this moment; and the discovery which I have made that such is the fact, is the only apology I need offer for obtruding myself upon your notice. In a word, *you* are innocent—and *I* am innocent;—

and we must aid and succour each other in proving our guiltlessness—aye, and in bringing the real criminal to justice!"

"The real criminal in which case?" asked the young gentleman, naturally placing himself upon his guard with a stranger.

"In both cases!" was the significant reply.

"Ah! is it possible?" exclaimed Eaton, with a start.

"Do you doubt it?" demanded Caroline, earnestly.

"You mistake the feeling which wrung from me that ejaculation of astonishment," returned Arthur. "The truth is, I had myself entertained a certain suspicion—but only vaguely and distantly, it is true: and now my wonder is excited at observing that you speak confidently of what I had scarcely dared to suspect faintly."

"I understand," said Caroline. "There have been moments when you have fancied it to be just possible that the same hand which inflicted the death-blow upon William Dudley, likewise carried the work of assassination into the home of the midwife? But you have not been able as yet to bring your mind to the settled conviction that such was indeed the fact?"

"You have interpreted my thoughts accurately, Miss Walters," observed the Honourable Mr. Eaton. "But how have you obtained the certainty——"

"That Fernanda is the murderess in both cases?" said Caroline, in ominous tone and with significant manner. "Ah! sir, the evidence against her speaks with a thousand tongues! I know everything connected with yourself and that perfidious creature—Lady Holderness: for I was an inmate of the midwife's house when she became a mother there—yes, and when the offspring of her shame was foully murdered on a night of tempest and of storm!"

"Murdered!" ejaculated Arthur Eaton, every lineament of his pale but handsome countenance suddenly expressing the most acute horror.

"Yes—murdered—foully murdered!" repeated Caroline. "I heard the poor infant's scream, penetrating through the furious noises of the night——"

"Enough! enough!" cried Eaton, starting from his chair. "'Twas my child—the offspring of our love—aye, and of our guilt—but I could have cherished it as fondly as if it were not born in shame! Oh! the foul, foul murderess. Just heaven! I will show her no mercy now! There have been moments when compassion and pity have well nigh prompted me to put a seal upon my lips concerning all that I have to tell, and mount the scaffold, or be consigned as a maniac to Bethlem, so that *she* might be saved. For I have remembered that I seduced her—that I wronged her—and that it was a woman's most righteous and most natural vengeance which she sought to wreak upon me. But now—now, that you assure me she is the murderess of her own child—*my* child——"

"As there is a God above us, sir, I am telling you the truth!" exclaimed Caroline. "Mine was the next room to that which Fernanda occupied at the midwife's;—and I heard enough to afford me a dread insight into the whole appalling tragedy. For the babe, at the very instant of its birth, was flung forth from the window—into the deep and rapid waters of the Thames——"

"Just heaven! did thy thunders sleep that night?" said Eaton, in a tone of mingled solemnity and despair as he sank back upon the seat whence he had risen a few minutes previously. "That Fernanda was cruel—implacable—merciless, I was, alas! too well aware: but that she was a veritable fiend in human shape, I had yet to learn."

"And now, sir, can you not believe that the woman who assented to the murder of her own child," asked Caroline, "is fully capable of putting to death all those who obstruct her path or menace her safety? In a word, is it not probable—is it not certain that the same hand which assassinated William Dudley, inflicted death upon the midwife? Look—listen—and attend carefully! The two crimes were perpetrated on the same night—both enveloped in a deep mystery—and both flinging their ominous shadows upon innocent persons. Of those innocent persons you are one and I am the other."

"Proceed—proceed," said Arthur, in an excited tone: for the murder of the babe was now goading even *his* generous soul to a savage vindictiveness.

"I have already informed you, sir," continued the young woman, "that I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley's establishment at the same time as Lady Holderness—then Fernanda Aylmer. But I knew not who she was: nor indeed, did I become enlightened on that head until yesterday. However, at the midwife's abode of infamy, I formed the acquaintance of Fernanda; and she spoke darkly and mysteriously to me of the terrible progress of her vengeance—a vengeance that was unsuspected by its object—unknown by its victim! And I also longed for vengeance—for, like her, had I been betrayed by the seducer. She promised to impart her secret to me—the secret of that vengeance which she was inflicting, even from the retreat of shame, upon the author of her dishonour. But she left the house suddenly and abruptly—and I saw her no more until yesterday, when I encountered her, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman, in Cavendish Square. I accosted her — and she spurned me from her,——yes spurned me with her looks—those looks that she can render so fierce and menacing when she chooses! The door of the palatial mansion which she entered, was shut in my face—and at the bottom of my soul did a feeling of bitter rancour spring up at the instant against that arrogant patrician female and her haughty-looking companion. I went into the neighbourhood and instituted certain inquiries. Heavens! what a light suddenly burst upon my mind! That lady, as I heard, was the late Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer—now the wife of Lord Holderness. She had formerly been engaged to you, sir,—the match was broken off—no one knew wherefore—and you had for many months pined with a malady that was deemed incurable. But you had suddenly revived—your health came back—and then occurred the mysterious and unaccountable murder of your valet, followed by your consignment to this gaol. These particulars — some gleaned in the course of my inquiries, and others already familiar to my knowledge—turned all my thoughts into a new channel. I had suddenly found a clue to the unravelment of *some* mysteries; while strange suspicions and glimmerings of light were taking birth in my mind relative to *others*. I at

once comprehended that *you*, Mr. Eaton, were the object of that remorseless vengeance of which Fernanda had spoken to me in Fore Street; and it struck me that you had been the victim of a slow poison. But who had administered it? Did not the death of William Dudley afford the key to the solution of that mystery? Yes—'twas your own valet whom the she-wolf had employed to carry out her revenge: and the murder of the man, whom she had made the agent of her iniquity, was calculated to serve a double purpose. It removed from the world an individual who could tell disagreeable truths concerning herself—and it fastened upon you a crime which, the demoness hoped, would send you to the scaffold. All these ideas sprang up in my brain, and assumed the regular order of a continuous chain of events. I saw and comprehended it all—motive and deed, cause and effect, action and aim! But my thoughts, when once pursuing such a channel, were not likely to stop half way; and then was it that *other* suspicions sprang up in my bosom. Mrs. Lindley was murdered on the same night as William Dudley. Why not, then, by the same hand? Yes; for the motive that would prompt the expediency of clearing the she-wolf's pathway of the valet, would suggest the prudence of doing the same by the midwife. Both were the depositories of secrets which they might reveal in the hour of remorse, or let slip in the moment of inadvertency; and the lady's ruin was constantly hanging as it were at the tip of two tongues. Away with them both!—silence them for ever!—and Fernanda is safe! Such was, no doubt, the reasoning of the demoness—that unnatural mother who had assented to the death of her newborn child! You appear impatient, Mr. Eaton; but I shall not detain you much longer with my explanations and commentaries."

"No—I am not impatient at what you are saying, Miss Walters," returned Arthur: "but I am excited—irritated—indignant when I reflect upon the weakness and folly which ever prompted me, even for a moment, to think of saving that woman and sacrificing myself!"

"Ah! well you may repent such intervals of unjustifiable leniency!" exclaimed Caroline. "But I was explaining to you, sir, how the inquiries which I made yesterday afternoon in the vicinage of Cavendish Square, turned all my thoughts into those channels which led me in a few minutes to fix upon Fernanda as the heroine of the two stupendous crimes with which yourself and I are severally charged. A change took place within me. I saw the possibility of rescuing my character from the hideous suspicion that was attached to it—and I felt a sudden yearning to throw off the loathsome reputation of a murderess. The hope of accomplishing this end became all in an instant blended with the previously-existing desire to humble that arrogant patrician lady and that haughty aristocrat who had closed their door in my face. I went back to their mansion—I demanded admission—I was shown into their presence. The conversation which ensued was pregnant with evidence that all my suspicions had flowed into the proper channels and were taking the right direction. The assertions I boldly made—the reminiscences I conjured up—the charges of guilt and turpitude at which I more than hinted, all touched the most excruciating chords in the hearts of that nobleman and his wife. But I need say no more: Fernanda is the murderess of William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley!"

"Yes—it must be so!" murmured Arthur Eaton: "and she will expiate her crimes upon the scaffold! Her husband, too, along with her—the father of those beauteous girls, Octavia and Pauline,—*he* also will be doubtless implicated——"

"And *our* innocence will be made manifest," observed Caroline. "Now, Mr. Eaton, shall we not co-operate in bringing about a result that will lift the weight of infamy from our heads and rescue our names from execration?"

"Assuredly, Miss Walters," was the response, delivered in a firm tone: "for, as you remarked ere now, our interests are at present identical. And to prove to you that I accept your co-operation as frankly and sincerely as it is offered, I will confide to your ears the narrative of the persecution which I have experienced at the hands of Lady Holderness."

The Honourable Arthur Eaton then detailed those particulars which are already known to the reader,—how he had discovered the receipts for the *Heir's Friend* and the *Antidote* at Mrs. Lindley's house—how Bradford, the celebrated chemist of Bond-street, had tested the nature and effects of these prescriptions—how the antidote had checked the wasting malady and brought back health—how Fernanda and Dudley had entered his room at night to consummate the crowning turpitude—how he had suffered the lady to depart—and how the valet, after confessing everything, had become truly repentant.

Caroline Walters listened with the deepest curiosity; and, as the reader may suppose, every word that fell from Arthur's lips confirmed the opinion which she had already formed with regard to Lady Holderness.

The turnkey soon re-appeared to conduct the young woman back to the department of the gaol in which she was lodged: but the promise of another fee elicited from the official a pledge that she should be allowed to re-visit Arthur's cell on the morrow.

CHAPTER CCXVI.

THE FAMILY VAULT.

In one of the most beautiful parts of Warwickshire stands the ancient village of Bellenden. Nothing can be more charmingly picturesque than this little group of habitations, situated on the gentle slope of a hill, and embowered as it were by stately oaks and chesnut-trees which had flourished for ages. The tower of the old church was covered with ivy; and the sacred fane itself was larger than such edifices usually are in country places. The cemetery was crowded with tombstones, some of them so old that the inscriptions were entirely effaced by the hand of Time: indeed, it was universally believed in the village and surrounding district that Bellenden church was one of the most ancient in the whole kingdom.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, when a travelling carriage drove up to the door of the Bellenden Arms, which was the name of the village tavern. There were no heraldic blazonries upon the panels of the vehicle: but the plain equipage

was instantaneously recognised, notwithstanding, by the landlord and his wife. Out they came, followed by the hostler and the chambermaid—the men cap in hand and the females all smiles and curtseys—for some years had elapsed since the Marchioness of Bellenden had honoured the village with her presence, and her arrival now was as welcome as it was unexpected!

Yes—it was the Marchioness herself who had just halted at the Bellenden Arms. She was travelling with post-horses and was attended only by a footman and a female domestic, both of whom had been for some years in her service and were of long-tried fidelity.

To the greetings of the landlord and landlady of the Bellenden Arms her ladyship responded in the kindest manner; and alighting from the carriage, she entered the homely parlour to which they escorted her. Having ordered some refreshment, she desired that a message should be sent to the village rector, requesting him to favour her with a call; and as the reverend gentleman lived within a couple of hundred yards of the tavern, he speedily waited upon the Marchioness.

"Mr. Roberts," said her ladyship, when the usual compliments and greetings had been exchanged, "I am desirous to visit the church for a particular purpose. Indeed, I purpose to descend into the vault of the Bellenden family; and I therefore request you to procure the necessary assistance to raise the stone and light me into the receptacle of the dead. You will perhaps also be good enough to accompany me, as I may need a witness with regard to the investigation that I am about to make."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be promptly attended to," said the Rev. Mr. Roberts, by no means startled at the nature of the instructions he had received, inasmuch as he at once comprehended that the object of the Marchioness bore

reference to the law-suit in which she was engaged with the Montgomery family. "Of course your ladyship is aware that the vaults have already been visited and the registers examined by agents sent down from London on the part of Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness?"

"I am no stranger to the fact which you mention," said the Marchioness. "Indeed, I have seen the affidavits which have been put in by my opponents, and which embody all the evidence obtained by Lord Montgomery's agents when they visited Bellenden Church. But I believe that his lordship himself came down in the first instance—did he not?"

"He did, my lady," answered Mr. Roberts. "It was about three months ago, as nearly as I can guess: but his lordship only remained in the village for a few hours, during which he was making all kinds of inquiries amongst the very oldest inhabitants of the place."

"And those inquiries were relative to the traditions of the Bellenden family?" said the Marchioness, interrogatively.

"Precisely so," returned the clergyman. "Just before his lordship took his departure he called upon me and said——"

"Tell me everything that fell from the Earl's lips on that occasion," exclaimed the Marchioness. "Consult your memory well—and omit not a single word that he uttered. You know not how important it is to my interests that I should sift to the very bottom all the particulars of Lord Montgomery's visit to this place."

"I am indebted to your ladyship for too much kindness not to be anxious to seek every opportunity of showing my gratitude," observed Mr. Roberts: "but even if it were not so, as a matter of justice I should give your ladyship all the information in my power, inasmuch as I consider your ladyship to be the victim of a gross conspiracy to deprive you of your estates. Such is the prevalent feeling in this part of Warwickshire——"

"The *prevalent* feeling—but not the *universal* one, I suppose?" said the Marchioness, inquiringly.

"Well, my lady," responded the clergyman, "I must confess that there are a few individuals in the village and the surrounding parts who espouse the interests of the Montgomerys: but I suppose they have been well paid for their allegiance in this respect—otherwise they would not be so staunch and so bold in asserting their conviction that your ladyship must lose the law-suit."

"Who are the persons you are referring to?" inquired Lady Bellenden: "and what kind of characters do they bear?"

"Characters, indeed!" exclaimed the parson: then, in a more serious tone, he added, "It ill becomes a Christian minister to speak harshly of people behind their backs—or under any circumstances whatsoever: but I cannot conscientiously declare that the individuals to whom I allude are trustworthy, honest, or respectable. In fact, the landlord and the landlady of the Bellenden Arms will corroborate my assertions——"

"But who *are* those individuals?" demanded the Marchioness, impatiently: and as she spoke she drew forth a set of ivory tablets from her reticule.

"In the first place, my lady," responded Mr. Roberts, "there is Chapman the stonemason——"

"And he doubtless was employed by Earl Montgomery's agents to open the vault of the Bellenden family?" said the Marchioness, inquiringly, as she wrote down the man's name in her tablets.

"Precisely so," returned the clergyman. "The sexton Mr. Northwitch, who is likewise a stonemason, was much surprised and vexed that Chapman, who is altogether unconnected with the church, should have had the job. However, such were the Earl's instructions to his agents; and as the vault was opened and examined under an order of the Court of Chancery, upon an affidavit put in by the Earl, there was no use in Northwitch's making any objection. Chapman accordingly did it for the Earl's agents."

"And now continue your list of the suspicious characters who speak against me and are wedded to the interests of the Montgomerys," said the Marchioness.

"I have mentioned Chapman," resumed Mr. Roberts: "and the next in the catalogue are the Austins—an old couple who live in a cottage about two miles off, on the road to Malden Farm. They are nasty people, I can assure your ladyship; and although they apparently live very retired and seem to keep themselves quiet, yet they are known to be anything but saints. The man Austin has a sister—a widow—who lives in a cottage near Congleton, and of whom report likewise speaks disparagingly. Her name is Bushman. She is a very old woman, but of astonishing activity and bustling habits——"

"But Congleton is fifty miles away," interrupted the Marchioness. "How, then, can this Widow Bushman's character and attributes be so well known in the village of Bellenden?"

"Because she was a resident here, my lady, until within the last year or eighteen months," answered Mr. Roberts; "and she was one of the most staunch of Earl Montgomery's partizans."

"Any other names to particularise?" asked the noble lady.

"None," was the reply. "Chapman, the Austins, and Widow Bushman are the principal. But, by the way, I recollect that I have not informed your ladyship of what Lord Montgomery said to me upon the occasion of his visit to this place three months ago."

"Speak slowly, Mr. Roberts," observed the Marchioness; "as I shall write it all down. Now—proceed."

"His lordship called upon me at the rectory just before he left the village," continued the clergyman,—"and, after the usual interchange of compliments, he said, '*Mr. Roberts, I have gleaned some very curious particulars concerning the deceased members of the Bellenden family, and which particulars are most important to my interests in the suit that I am carrying on against the Marchioness.*'—I thereupon begged his lordship not to make me his confidant, as I was bound by gratitude to support the cause and defend the interests of the noble lady who gave me the presentation of the Bellenden rectory.—'*I am aware of your devotion in that quarter, Mr. Roberts.*' said Earl Montgomery; '*and so far from being angry with you, I honour you for it. Indeed I have called upon you from motives of respect and courtesy, and to inform you that in consequence of*

the curious particulars I have this day gleaned from some of the patriarchs of the village, I shall cause the vault of the Bellenden family to be examined and the register of deaths to be searched.'—Upon hearing these announcements, I respectfully but firmly explained to his lordship that he was welcome to consult the registers, but that he could not be permitted to break open the family vault of the house of Bellenden, without a proper authority or permission.—'*Well, you are quite right to act cautiously, Mr. Roberts,*' exclaimed the Earl, with an off-hand manner and indifferent tone. '*I will apply to the Lord Chancellor for an order to open the vault; and I will send down agents duly authorised to carry this aim into effect. The examination of the registers can stand over until the same opportunity. Indeed, it will be better that the same persons should conduct both investigations, because there will then be only one set of witnesses, and consequently a saving of expense. I presume, Mr. Roberts, that when I do thus send my agents down, you will throw no obstacle in their way.*'—I answered that I should obey any official mandate or proper authority in respect to the opening of the vault; and that as for the registers, any one was at liberty to inspect them on certain terms.—'*The truth is,*' continued the Earl, who seemed resolved to be communicative, although I can assure your ladyship there was nothing encouraging in my manner towards him, '*a great deal—indeed, almost everything on the Marchioness of Bellenden's side—depends upon a particular conveyance deed which she has put into Court. This deed is alleged to have been signed by the late Marquis of Bellenden's father fifty years ago—that is to say, in the year* 1745. *But according to what I have been able to glean from one old man of eighty-four, another of seventy-three, and a third of sixty-nine, the particular Marquis of Bellenden alluded to died and was buried at least two years before* 1745; *and my informants are enabled to speak thus positively as to dates, because that of* 1745 *was the year of the Great Rebellion. If, therefore, it should transpire that the late Marquis's father did really die in* 1743, *and not in* 1745, *then the conveyance deed which Lady Bellenden has filed in Court must be a forgery, because it purports to have been dated and signed in* 1745.'"

"Lord Montgomery was very kind and condescending to narrate all these particulars," observed the Marchioness of Bellenden, who had committed to her tablets every sentence and syllable uttered by the clergyman. "Did he tell you anything more, Mr. Roberts?"

"His lordship merely said that if he had appeared strangely communicative, it was only because he was conducting the law-suit in an open, frank, and candid manner, and he did not care if all the world knew each successive step that was taken in it, so far as he was concerned. And now," added the Rev. Mr. Roberts, "that I have told your ladyship all that passed between the Earl and myself on the occasion referred to, I will hasten to make the necessary preparations for your visit to the church."

With these words the reverend gentleman took a temporary leave of the Marchioness, who now remained alone in the parlour at the inn. For a few minutes she reflected profoundly upon all that she had just heard: then, as a smile of triumph appeared slowly upon her beautiful countenance, she murmured to herself, "The victory shall be mine—and Eugene Montgomery shall sink humbled, terror-stricken, and a miserable suppliant at my feet."

Having thus expressed the feeling that was uppermost in her mind,—a feeling which certainly savoured more of vindictiveness than was quite consistent with her character for Christian benevolence and pious resignation,—the Marchioness of Bellenden rang the bell for her confidential domestics.

Of these two individuals we must say a few words. The female attendant was a woman of about fifty years of age—still retaining the traces of great beauty, and wearing a matronly appearance of the highest respectability. In fact, her looks, her style of dress, her manner, and her speech, all seemed to denote a sedateness without hypocrisy, and a deep sense of religious feeling without fanaticism.

The footman was a tall, handsome man, with a dark complexion and a serious look. He was about forty years of age: his figure was finely modelled, the stalwart proportions being blended with masculine grace;—and his demeanour was altogether superior to his situation. He seemed older than he really was on account of the air of extreme steadiness which characterised him, and which was the dominant impression that his appearance made upon the mind of any one who saw him for the first time,—so that it was necessary to look as it were beneath that aspect of sedateness to discover that he was in reality a very handsome man.

In a word, judging from their external appearances, the female attendant and the footman were two domestics of the most respectable class, and precisely such as a widow-lady of excellent reputation might be expected to have in her suite.

We said that the Marchioness of Bellenden, soon after Mr. Roberts had quitted her, summoned those two dependants to her presence;—and perhaps the reader will expect to be informed that on entering the room they still retained all the cold reserve of manner and ceremonial rigidity of countenance which invested them with so decorous an air of sedateness. No such thing! The instant the door closed behind them, their appearance changed as if by magic; the matronly demeanour which was so imposing on the part of the female, and the serious look which gave such an air of respectability to the man, were thrown off all in a moment, and with an evident feeling of relief at passing from a condition of studied restraint to the relaxation and abandonment of temporary freedom.

"What news, my dear?" demanded the female, with a mingled curiosity and friendly interest in her voice and manner: and she took a chair without waiting for either invitation or permission to be seated.

"Yes—what news, Laura?" inquired the footman, flinging himself upon the sofa, stretching out his legs, and passing his fingers through his wavy and perfumed hair. "Has Parson Roberts been able to give you any particulars in addition to what you already knew?"

"Many — and all most important, my dear Richard," replied the Marchioness, who was evidently accustomed to this familiarity with her two confidential domestics. "In a word, I have found

out the places where Montgomery and his hired ruffians halted on two occasions—and you must start off presently and take the necessary steps to make these discoveries available and useful in case of need. One place is a cottage two miles from hence, on the road to Malden Farm: it is kept by an old couple named Austin. The other place is also a cottage, but about fifty miles distant—in fact, close by Congleton: the woman who keeps it, is called Widow Bushman—and she is related to the Austins."

"And what about the man who opened the vault for Montgomery's agents?" said the footman inquiringly.

"Ah! what about him?" echoed the female dependant.

"Now, do not be impatient Richard—nor you either, Margaret," said Lady Bellenden, in a tone of good-humoured chiding: "and you shall both know everything in time. The stone-mason's name is Chapman—and he lives in the village. I shall get you, Margaret, to see him while I visit the church; and you must not be sparing of gold in order to win him over to my interests. The evidence he can give would no doubt be important."

"Depend upon it, my love," said Margaret, in a tone of earnest assurance, "nothing shall be wanting on my part to forward your interests."

"And I know you will believe me, Laura, when I say the same thing," observed Richard. "But when do you wish me to visit these Austins who dwell in the neighbourhood, and that Widow Bushman who resides near Congleton?"

"I wish you to start off at once, Richard," replied the Marchioness. "You can doubtless procure a vehicle of some sort——"

"Give yourself no concern on that head, my dear Laura," said the footman: "I shall find some means of conveyance. Tell me where and when I am to rejoin you—and I shall be off."

"You will either find me or hear of me at Malden Farm," returned the lady. "If I quit that place before you reach it, I will leave a letter for you. Have you plenty of money in your purse?"

"Plenty," answered Richard. "And now good bye for the present."

Thus speaking, the footman rose from the sofa and embraced the Marchioness of Bellenden. In a moment her eyes, usually of so soft and melting an expression, became illumined with a burning lustre: as if through those windows of the soul shone forth the sudden kindling of all the fires of her impassioned nature. Throwing her arms round the neck of that man who thus freely bestowed his caresses upon her, the titled lady glued her lips to his swarthy but handsome countenance;—and by the lighting up of her fine blue eyes, the deep flushing of her plump cheeks, and the quick heaving and falling of her luxuriant bosom, it was evident that the slightest contact with her good-looking dependant served as a spark to the train of her desires and made them flame up as it were into a frenzy.

"Hush! a footstep approaches!" exclaimed Margaret: and rising from her chair, she suddenly resumed her artificial demeanour of matronly sedateness as easily as if it were a cloak that she was putting on without an effort.

At the same instant, too, the handsome footman, starting from the embrace of his noble mistress, drew himself up to his full height and stood in her presence with a look and an attitude that denoted the profoundest respect. The Marchioness rapidly smoothed her hair, arranged her cap, and composed her looks in such a manner that the keenest observer could not have noticed the slightest indication to lead him to suspect that her features had so recently been ruffled by sensuous desires. Every trace of that voluptuous expression had passed away from her countenance, which all in a moment became as placid and as calmly beautiful as if the burning kiss of lust had never been imprinted on its damask surface!

Thus, when the Rev. Mr. Roberts re-entered the room, on his return from the church, he found the two dependants standing before their mistress with the proper air of respectful attention—while the lady herself was issuing her orders in a tone where mildness and conscious authority were so nicely blended as to denote alike the kind mistress and the well-bred woman.

"You will therefore start off at once, Richard," said the Marchioness; "and you must be particularly careful in executing the commissions which I have entrusted to you."

"Your ladyship may rest assured on that head," returned the footman: then, with a low bow—while not a muscle of his countenance relaxed from the serious expression which it had assumed—he took his departure.

"And you, Margaret," resumed Lady Bellenden, "will have the goodness to step out into the village and make these inquiries which I have been dictating to you."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be faithfully attended to," was the response: and Margaret likewise quitted the room.

"Everything is now ready at the church for your ladyship's reception," said the Rev. Mr. Roberts.

"I thank you," observed the Marchioness: then hastily putting on her bonnet and throwing her scarf over her shoulders, she accepted the arm of the clergyman who proposed to escort her to the sacred edifice.

As she passed through the village, all the inhabitants appeared at their doors to greet her with bows and curtseys; and these salutations were acknowledged with the sweetest affability on her part. In a few minutes the churchyard was reached; and beneath the porch of the ancient building the sexton and his assistant were waiting her ladyship's arrival. In accordance with the instructions they received through Mr. Roberts, they were provided with implements to raise the stones and lanterns to light the vaults.

The sun was shining through the windows, the countless diamond panes of which gave a prismatic effect to the warm lustre: and it seemed as if slanting lines, or rather oblique columns, of impalpable dust stretched from those windows half across the nave of the church. Leaning upon the clergyman's arm, and followed by Northwitch and his assistant, the Marchioness of Bellenden threaded the aisle, until the party came to a cloistral recess which was screened off by a partition of stone-work elaborately sculptured. Within the enclosure the walls were covered with monumental tablets, all sacred to the memories of the departed scions of the noble house of Bellenden: and the huge flagstones of the pavement were likewise covered with inscriptions.

"There is one particular stone which must be raised, I believe," said the Marchioness, as her eyes wandered slowly over the pavement,—"inasmuch as it covers the steps leading down into the vault."

"This is the stone, my lady," returned Northwitch, pointing with a crowbar to a particular flag.

"Then raise it," said the Marchioness. "Will the task be a long one? Because, if so, I may as well search in the meantime for a particular entry in the register of deaths."

"We shall not be long moving the stone, my lady," replied Northwitch: "because it was lifted a short time back, and is therefore comparatively loose in its setting. I mean that the cement is not properly dry yet; and I dare say that Chapman who raised the stone for the Earl's agents, did not trouble himself to put it down again with overmuch care. However, here goes!"

To work accordingly went the sexton and his assistant; and Lady Bellenden decided upon remaining to visit the place of tombs first, before she repaired to the vestry to examine the register.

In about twenty minutes the enormous stone was raised and rolled back from the mouth of the subterranean which it covered. The sexton and his man then lighted their lanterns; and having allowed a few minutes for the escape of the foul air from the place, they descended the narrow flight of stone steps which led down into the family vault of the ancient race of Bellenden. The Marchioness followed—and the clergyman closed the rear.

The subterranean has *already* been described, in a former chapter, as spacious;—*and round the walls were arranged numerous coffins, in three rows —the lowest standing upon the paved floor, and the other two resting on stout iron supporters projecting from the solid masonry. By these means no coffin actually stood upon another; and between the rows there was space sufficient to enable the plates upon the lids to be examined without moving the coffins themselves.*

The party reached the bottom of the steps and were advancing farther into the vault, when a sudden ejaculation of horror burst from the lips of the sexton who was leading the way.

"What is the matter?" demanded Lady Bellenden, for the moment stricken by a superstitious terror.

"There—yonder—that coffin!" cried Northwitch, pointing in a particular direction with one hand and holding the lantern high up with the other.

"Ah! I see," ejaculated his assistant, drawing back a pace or two with a visible shuddering of his entire form.

At the same instant the Marchioness and Mr. Roberts caught sight of the object which had produced such a sensation upon the sexton and his man;—and exclamations of mingled horror and disgust broke from the noble lady and the reverend gentleman. For, behold! on the uppermost row, at the farthest extremity of the vault, a coffin had burst open—and a putrid corpse was exposed to view.

"How shocking!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, a raw, damp, and mouldy smell now offending her nostrils, and a thick clammy taste clinging to her palate. "But whose corpse can it be, that it is comparatively so well preserved?"

"Why, my lady," cried Northwitch, "that body may have been here twenty, thirty, or even forty years, and yet be no more than half-decomposed as it is now. It is the embalming and the leaden coffins that preserve them. This particular coffin has however burst, as your ladyship perceives: shell and all, it is laid completely open. But I'll soon see whose corpse it is."

With these words, the sexton approached the coffin and held the lantern in such a manner that its rays might fall upon the piece of the broken lid where the plate still remained. As a matter of course the light streamed upon the dead body, from which a considerable portion of the winding-sheet had fallen away; and not only was its countenance exposed, but the neck, chest, and right side were all laid bare.

"I should think that this body must have been placed here at least twenty years ago," observed the sexton, as he thus took a near view of the loathsome spectacle. "It is even more swollen and discoloured than it is decomposed, now that I examine it close. In fact, it must have been splendidly embalmed—for the features are well nigh perfect—and the hands are entire. Ah! here's actually the mark of a ring upon one of the fingers! Why, the ring that made the mark must have been on the hand until lately: it has evidently been plucked off within a recent period. There's the scraping, as one may call it, which the ring made along the rotting finger as it was drawn away. But, heavens! how curiously the corpse is discoloured! I've seen a vast many bodies in my time—and some few that have been embalmed: but I never saw one that, not being more decomposed than this, was so shockingly discoloured. Besides—not only unnaturally discoloured—but also swollen—dreadfully swollen! Ah! it looks uncommonly as if the deceased, whoever he was, had died by poison!"

"Well, whose corpse is it?" demanded the assistant, somewhat impatiently. "Can't you make the plate out? or is the inscription rusted away?"

"No—it is tolerably plain," returned the sexton. "Let me see? The date is 1775——why, it's the last Marquis of Bellenden, to be sure—her ladyship's husband!" exclaimed Northwitch.

"Cover up the remains with something!" cried the Rev. Mr. Roberts. "Here—stay——I will run and fetch a piece of the church mourning from the vestry——"

"No—do not trouble yourself," said the Marchioness, as she clung to his arm: and the voice in which she spoke was low and hollow.

"Ah! your ladyship is unwell?" exclaimed Mr. Roberts; and turning his eyes upon the Marchioness, he was startled and shocked at the ghastly expression which her countenance wore. "Shall I conduct you hence?—let me lead you away? The sickly odour—the dreadful spectacle —and the sexton's words—all are enough to overpower your ladyship——"

"No, no—I will remain—I feel better now," murmured the Marchioness: then, with an almost superhuman effort to crush the feelings that were struggling in her bosom, she turned towards the sexton, saying, "Mr. Northwitch, I should recommend you to be more cautious and guarded for the future in the free and off-hand way in which you toss as it were from the tip of your tongue the first words that come uppermost. You should weigh

your thoughts before you so glibly give utterance to them. For by proclaiming in so random a manner the very first and of course most inconsiderate impressions which any particular occurrence or spectacle may make upon your mind, you may be unintentionally the cause of exciting the most disagreeable suspicions."

"I humbly beg your ladyship's pardon," said the man, who did not immediately perceive the drift of the noble lady's observations, and therefore was for a few moments at a loss to comprehend how he had done wrong: "but I am sure I did not mean to give offence when I talked of the discoloured state of his lordship's body. And as for my saying that it seemed as if his lordship the late Marquis had been poisoned, the notion is absurd. But I made the remark before I knew whose coffin it was——"

"Enough upon the subject, Mr. Northwitch," said the Marchioness, in a voice which she now rendered mournful though firm. "You have wounded my feelings deeply: but I pardon you—yes, cheerfully pardon you. I know you spoke inconsiderately——"

"I did, upon my soul, my lady," exclaimed the sexton, quite concerned to think how much mischief his unguarded words had occasioned. "We all know that you are a kind-hearted and excellent lady —and I would sooner cut my tongue out than allow it to hurt your ladyship's feelings."

"I believe you, Northwitch," said the Marchioness, in a tone of compassion and forgiveness. "But you must learn, my good friend, that the remains of the dead often present the most remarkable appearances ——do they not, Mr. Roberts?"

"Assuredly, my lady," responded the clergyman, who, although a well meaning and harmless kind of an individual, nevertheless carried his obsequiousness to the extreme of a fulsome sycophancy, and was therefore ready to corroborate everything that his aristocratic patroness might say.

"The swollen and discoloured appearance of the corpse of my long-dead husband," continued the Marchioness, in a tone profoundly mournful, "is only one of the sad phases of decomposition——is it not so, Mr. Roberts?"

"Beyond all matter of doubt, my lady," was the reply.

"And most sad and distressing is it for me, to have been doomed this day to gaze upon the remains of one whom I respected so profoundly on earth," continued the Marchioness, "but who for long years past has been a saint in heaven! Ah! Mr. Roberts, I am no hypocrite—I am incapable of affecting a feeling that is not intrinsically real. I therefore admit, with frankness and with candour, that I did not love the old and venerable nobleman who made me his wife—gave me his name—and bequeathed to me that fortune which dishonest pretenders would now wrest from my grasp: no—I did not *love* him in the true sense of the term—but I respected him—I revered him—I esteemed him as a man who sought to ensure my happiness to the utmost of his power——"

"I am glad your ladyship has said this much," exclaimed Northwitch, with an honest exultation, although the interruption was somewhat of the rudest: "for that scandalous fellow Chapman declares that your ladyship hated and detested the late Marquis—and that your ladyship loved another, saving your ladyship's presence——"

"Northwitch, have done—be quiet—silence!" exclaimed the Rev. Mr. Roberts, perfectly horrified at the sexton's indiscretion, although it plainly arose from the man's zealous devotion to the cause of the Marchioness in opposition to that of the Montgomerys.

"The venom of scandalous tongues produces no disagreeable effects upon me," observed the Marchioness, in a tone of bland resignation: "and whatever rumours my worthy friend Mr. Northwitch has heard, need not distress him on my account. But assuredly this is not the most pleasant place in the world to choose for our conversation," cried her ladyship, in a different voice: "and I feel the damp of the vault striking chill and cold to my very bones. Let us, then, proceed to search for the object which has brought me hither. Mr. Northwitch, you will oblige me by finding the coffin of the late Marquis's father. The plate should bear the obituary date of 1745—but if you happen to find one of 1743——"

"Here is the coffin, my lady, of which you speak," exclaimed the sexton, pausing in the midst of the scrutiny which he had commenced with regard to the tenements of the dead. "But the date is 1743——"

"That will do," said the Marchioness. "Now, wrench off the plate—or rather remove it gently if you can—and be careful to keep the four screws:"—then, turning towards the clergyman, she observed, "Mr. Roberts, as my witness in this proceeding, you will maintain your eyes fixed upon that plate and those screws, in order to be enabled to identify them on any future occasion.'

"I will do so, my lady," answered the minister.

The plate was wrenched off, and, together with the screws, was given into the keeping of the reverend gentleman. The Marchioness of Bellenden then quitted the vault, having liberally remunerated the sexton and his assistant, and having charged them to get the coffin of her deceased husband properly repaired before they finally sealed the mouth of the family vault again.

"Accompanied by Mr. Roberts, the Marchioness now proceeded to the vestry of the church; and on reaching that room, she said, "In the first place, reverend sir, you must envelop that coffin-plate and the screws in a sheet of paper and affix your seal to the packet, so that you may be enabled at the proper time to prove the identity of those objects."

The noble lady's instructions were immediately obeyed: and she then desired the clergyman to produce the parochial Register of Buria's. Opening a small closet, or cabinet, which joined the vestry-room, Mr. Roberts took the bulky volume from the iron safe where it was kept; and the Marchioness proceeded to examine it with the most careful scrutiny. At length she discoved the particular entry which she sought and of which she bade Mr. Roberts take especial notice.

A few minutes afterwards Lady Bellenden quitted the church; and, returning to the inn, she entered her carriage and took her departure from the village, accompanied by the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER CCXVII.

MALDEN FARM.

It was now about five o'clock in the evening, and the breeze, laden with the perfumes of May, came with a delightful freshness after the sultry heat which had previously prevailed.

Having ascended a hill, the sides and summit of which were embowered with the richest emerald foliage, the travelling-carriage proceeded at a more rapid rate along the narrow bye-road which it was pursuing; and at a distance of about two miles from the village, a small but neat-looking cottage, standing in a lonely spot, was passed by.

"That is the abode of the Austins," said the Marchioness of Bellenden to Margaret, who was seated inside the carriage along with her noble mistress. "I wonder how Richard has succeeded with them."

"Better, I hope, than I did with old Chapman," responded Margaret. "But perhaps Richard is still there," she added, looking forth from the window of the vehicle. "And yet I do not see the chaise which he hired from the landlord of the Bellenden Arms; and there is no stable or out-house where it could be put up."

"We may therefore conclude that he has seen the Austins and gone on post-haste towards Congleton," said the Marchioness. "But, alluding to Chapman, you need not feel vexed, my dear Margaret, that you were unable to succeed in that quarter: we have plenty of evidence, heaven knows, without him. And yet," she added in a mournful voice, "I shall derive but comparatively little pleasure from the fact of securing to myself the safe and undisputed possession of these estates, since he whom I love so madly—so passionately—so fervidly, can never be mine! No, it were useless to make another attempt to bring him within the circle of my influence——"

"Let us not despair on that head, my dear Laura," interrupted Margaret.

Lady Bellenden made no response: but, heaving a low and long sigh, she fell into a profound reverie.

In about an hour from the moment of quitting the village, the travelling-carriage emerged from the bye-lane which it had been pursuing, and entered a broader road.

"There!" suddenly ejaculated the Marchioness, as she pointed from the window towards a bridge which was in the course of being erected over a clear stream about ninety or a hundred feet wide.

"Yes—that is the spot!" cried Margaret, a visible shudder agitating her whole frame. "Ten or a dozen years have elapsed since I was last in this neighbourhood—and great improvements have been made. This wide road—that bridge——"

"Ah! that bridge," added the noble lady: and she exchanged significant looks with her faithful dependant.

The carriage was now leaving the bridge behind and advancing along the road towards a small farm-house about a quarter of a mile distant, and the white walls of which gleamed forth from the midst of the foliage that enhanced the picturesque beauty of the landscape.

"Behold Malden Farm," said the Marchioness. "There are the same heavy overhanging gables—the same small and deep-set windows, with their diamond-fashioned panes—the same portico with the creeping clematis, which I remember years and years ago when first I visited the Bellenden estates."

"And there, too," added Margaret, looking towards a splendid mansion which stood upon an eminence about a couple of miles beyond the farm, —"there too, is Bellenden Hall, the finest country-seat in Warwickshire. The whole domain which the view can now embrace, belongs to thee, dear Laura;—and, thank heaven! the hated Montgomerys shall not wrest it from thy grasp. But are you decided upon stopping at Malden Farm instead of going on to the Hall?"

"Yes—such is my intention, Margaret," responded the noble lady. "You know that I have not long to remain in Warwickshire—that this law-suit compels my immediate return to London—and that it therefore becomes a matter of consequence to save every mile of road and minute of time. The Farm is two miles nearer than the Hall to the new bridge, at which point, you know," she added significantly, "we have such important business to transact: and moreover, by staying at the Farm, we at once obtain the opportunity of making inquiries concerning Lord Raymond Montgomery——"

"For what earthly purpose, Laura?" demanded Margaret. "Since you are confident that you have not been misled respecting that young nobleman's fate, wherefore ask any questions regarding him?"

"To prevent *others* from suspecting that we are already so well informed on that head," returned the Marchioness.

"Then you mean that the discovery which is to be made either to-night or to-morrow morning, shall have the appearance of hazard and accident?" continued the dependant, interrogatively

"Precisely so," answered the noble lady. "Indeed, I do not purpose to proclaim to the world all I know or all I may yet glean relative to my opponents, unless they force me to extremes."

"I understand—and I approve of the course which you intend to adopt," said Margaret.

At this moment the carriage entered an avenue of evergreens, the great gate leading into which was held open by a stout, sun-burnt, middle-aged man whose countenance was the picture of good-humour and vigorous health. This was Farmer Brooks, the occupant of Malden, and therefore one of the numerous tenantry of the Marchioness, inasmuch as she held possession of the estates during the progress of the Chancery suit. He had observed the carriage approaching; and having ordered his wife, who was a comely woman of four-and-forty, "to see that all was comfortable and tidy in-doors," he had run down to the end of the avenue to open the gate.

Mrs. Brooks was one of those simple-minded and well-meaning bodies—one of those ingenuous and honest creatures, that are rarely (at least at her age) to be met amidst the contamination of cities and great towns, but which are often found in the small farm-houses or secluded cottages of agricultural districts. The receipt of a letter in the morning to the effect that the Marchioness of Bellenden would visit Malden Farm in the evening, and perhaps pass the night there, had put the worthy woman quite

upon the *qui vive;* and during the whole day she had been making preparations to receive the illustrious guest. In this task she had been duly assisted by her son and daughter—the former a young man of two or three-and-twenty, and the latter a girl of eighteen or nineteen. The comely matron and her two good-looking, sun-burnt, healthy auxiliaries presented a picture of domestic cordiality and love such as the eye does not often contemplate beneath the roof of rich men's dwellings.

Sincere and honest was the welcome which the Marchioness therefore experienced at Malden Farm; and finding that so much pains had been bestowed upon the repast which was just ready to be served up, she did not choose to give any offence or wound sensitive feelings by not partaking of it at once. She accordingly resolved to postpone until the morning her walk to the bridge which was being constructed;—and having laid aside her bonnet and scarf, she sate down to table, in company with the farmer's family and Margaret, all of whom she insisted on making her companions for the time, and not her servitors.

"I am sure, my lady," said Farmer Brooks, during a pause in the progress of the festivities, "I am more honoured and much happier than I can well express in words, on account of this visit which your ladyship has condescended to pay my humble abode. I know that your ladyship's steward and housekeeper up at the Hall will be much annoyed that your ladyship did not put up at your own house instead of stopping at mine—I mean, that your ladyship did not proceed direct to your own seat instead of tarrying at Malden Farm, which certainly is your own likewise though tenanted by me. And I can add with truth and sincerity that although young Lord Raymond did lodge at our house for a considerable time, and not only behave munificiently but also in a most friendly manner towards us,—yet I unfeignedly hope that your ladyship will beat the Montgomerys and the Aylmers in the long run and continue our mistress and our landlady."

"I am sure we should never get a better," exclaimed Mrs. Brooks, in a tone of unaffected fervour. "But I hope your ladyship was not offended with us for letting Lord Raymond come to lodge at the Farm——"

"If I had been offended, my good woman," interrupted the Marchioness, "should I have visited you this evening, thereby preferring for the time your dwelling to my own country-seat which is so near at hand? Besides, when Lord Raymond first applied to you for permission to establish himself as a lodger in the peaceful seclusion of Malden Farm, you wrote to me frankly and ingenuously upon the subject."

"And your ladyship replied that you had no personal animosity against your cousin Lord Raymond Montgomery," observed Farmer Brooks, "and that you therefore entertained not the slightest objection to his becoming a lodger beneath this roof."

"I think that I said even something more than this," remarked Lady Bellenden: "for if my memory serves me truly, I stated in my reply to your letter, Mr. Brooks, that I entertained the deepest sympathy and compassion for my cousin Raymond, to whom however I have not spoken for so many years. But I had heard of his hopeless passion for the beautiful Fernanda Aylmer, now Lady Holderness,—I had heard of the enthusiastic devotion with which he worshipped that splendid creature,—I had heard of the heartless coquetry which she practised towards him, giving him encouragement at one time, and then jilting him for the Honourable Mr. Eaton, whom she did not marry after all,—I had heard these various particulars, I say, and I was touched with pity for the young noble. Indeed, I expressed myself in those terms when writing the reply to your letter."

"I remember it well, my lady," said Brooks; "and the kind, the handsome, the friendly tone of your letter decided me and my wife in receiving Lord Raymond into our house, agreeably to his request."

"I suppose that being well nigh heart-broken by his disappointed love," observed the Marchioness, "he courted solitude as the only condition of existence which could possibly accord with a mind so wounded and a spirit so bruised as his own. Poor youth! I had heard much of his amiability—his goodness of heart—his generosity towards the poor;—and I pitied him—sincerely pitied him. And to tell you the truth, it was partially with the desire of meeting my unfortunate cousin, whom I have not seen since his childhood, that I resolved to tarry at your abode, good people, during my few hours' visit to this neighbourhood. Is Raymond at home?" she inquired, lowering her voice as if she fancied that the young nobleman himself might possibly overhear the question which she had just put.

"At home!—here! my lady?" cried Farmer Brooks, astonished at the question. "But I recollect," he added, in a calmer tone as he recovered from his amazement: "you may not have heard of what has happened——"

"Has anything disagreeable occurred?" demanded Lady Bellenden, with all the appearance of intense surprise and painful curiosity.

"Three months have elapsed, my lady," responded the farmer, in a solemn tone, "since Lord Raymond fled from Malden—yes—left us with a cruel abruptness that savoured even of ingratitude after all the attention we showed him and the endeavours we made to comfort and cheer him."

"Lord Raymond left you thus!" cried the Marchioness. "How extraordinary that he should have acted in such a manner!"

"Perhaps, my lady," suggested Margaret, in a deferential tone, "the poor young nobleman is scarcely responsible for his actions—and he may have obeyed some sudden impulse——"

"That is what I and my wife have said to each other a thousand times since his lordship's disappearance," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "Besides, he was often subjected to wild freaks of fancy and strange humours, which were wont to yield to fits of the deepest despondency. More than once has he said to me, '*My good friend, if I should suddenly take it into my head to leave your abode and set out on a pedestrian tour through the North of England, do not be surprised. I sometimes feel as if nothing but violent exercise and a continuous change of scene will save me from going mad.*'—And yet, although we were thus warned by Lord Raymond, we were alarmed and vexed when he disappeared so suddenly: but finding that letters soon afterwards arrived here addressed to him as usual, we felt reassured by the belief that his friends and relatives knew that he was safe——"

"Besides, what could possibly have happened to him?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden. "If he had been foully dealt with, traces of the crime would have remained; and if he had committed suicide in a moment of intolerable anguish or blank despair, his corpse would have been discovered. Depend upon it, good people, the poor young gentleman is wandering like a troubled spirit about the country ——"

"And what inclines us to that belief, my lady, is that he took away with him all his money and all his private papers on the morning when he left us," said Farmer Brooks. "His bed had been slept in during the previous night—and the inference is that he had risen early——that is to say, early for the time of year; for it was in the winter season—just at the end of February——"

"It was the 26th, father," observed young Brooks.

"You are particular as to the date, my boy," said his parent.

"I remember it so well, father," returned the lad, "because it was on the same Monday morning that the great crowning-stone fell upon the buttress of the new bridge."

"Ah! what—an accident?" inquired the Marchioness.

"No, my lady—that is to say, not an accident by which anybody was hurt," responded young Brooks. "But when I and my mates went down to begin work soon after day-break——"

"My son, your ladyship should know, is a stonemason," interrupted the elder Brooks, by way of explanation; "and he has been engaged from the first upon the new bridge which your ladyship ordered to be built across the river. When one of the buttresses was completed about three months ago, it was determined that your ladyship's steward should be invited by all the tenants in this district to superintend the deposit of an earthen jar full of coins in the great hollow of the buttress. The crowning-stone was sus-

pended over the mouth with such precision and in such a manner that on loosening the winch-rope which sustained it, the massive granite could not fail to settle exactly on the head of the buttress."

"Such was the condition in which we had left the stone on the Saturday night," observed young Brooks; "and when we went to work on the Monday morning, lo and behold! the winch-rope had given way and the crowning-stone had fallen upon the buttress. But as it had settled to a hair's-breadth in the position which it was intended to occupy, your ladyship's steward decided upon not having it disturbed for the mere sake of placing the coins inside the buttress."

"And therefore the ceremony did not take place?" exclaimed the Marchioness, inquiringly.

"No, my lady," responded young Brooks. "Your ladyship's steward gave orders that the ceremony should be postponed until the next buttress is built——"

"But this is absurd!" cried the Marchioness, in a tone of apparent annoyance and dissatisfaction: "my orders were explicit upon the subject—and they have not been obeyed. I wrote to my steward, commanding him to have the usual ceremony performed at the proper time—and I sent him a quantity of old coins which he was to use, in addition to the various specimens of the existing currency, for the purpose. Now there is a sort of superstition in the minds of many honest but simple country-folks, relative to the baptizing of the foundation-stones of a new bridge with a bottle of wine, and the deposit of the coins in the first buttress;—and I would not for the world have such a prejudice shocked——"

"I am glad your ladyship has mentioned the matter," observed Mrs. Brooks; "for I can assure your ladyship that many of your ladyship's tenants declare they will never cross that bridge—for, let it be built ever so strong, they think it won't be safe on account of omitting the usual ceremonies when the first buttress was raised."

"Then we will have the affair righted to-morrow, my good woman," said the Marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "Let your son step up to the Hall and tell my steward that I have arrived at Malden Farm, where I propose to pass the night—and that early in the morning I will myself superintend the ceremonials relative to the bridge. Immediate preparations must therefore be made for the purpose—especially as the huge stone over the first buttress must be raised again——"

"I will go at once, my lady," said young Brooks, rising from his seat, "and deliver your message at the Hall. I will then go and inform the overseer of the works that the masons must be at the bridge by daylight. Shall I tell the steward that he is to wait upon your ladyship this evening?"

"No—I will see him in the morning upon matters of business," returned the Marchioness: "for it is now past eight o'clock—and I propose to retire to rest soon, in order to rise early in the morning. The time has passed so agreeably in your society, my worthy friends, and our conversation has been so varied——"

"But there is one thing I quite forgot to mention to your ladyship," exclaimed Farmer Brooks, as an idea struck him—"and that is, a lawyer's clerk was here yesterday inquiring for Lord Raymond Montgomery——"

"Ah! Mr. Rigden's clerk, I presume?" said the noble lady.

"Yes—that's the name of the lawyer who sent him," continued the farmer." He came in a post-chaise—quite a bustle ——"

"And so important withal," added Miss Brooks, who now joined in the conversation for the first time.

"Oh! he quite put my daughter out," exclaimed. Brooks, laughing,—"by asking her such a host of questions. And when he found that we could give him no clue to search after Lord Raymond, he actually became saucy—said it was very queer—very suspicious ——"

"And so I told him he had better go about his business," remarked Miss Brooks; "whereupon he grew more civil and even apologised for what he had been saying of an offensive character."

"And did he set off again on his return to London?" inquired the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"No, my lady—I believe not," responded Miss Brooks. "He said that he should make inquiries all over the neighbourhood—that he should proceed to the village of Bellenden—and that he should leave no stone unturned to discover some clue to his missing lordship. But it does not appear that he has much time for making his search; because he says that unless he can find him before midnight on the 30th of May ——"

"He loses every possible pretension—even if he possessed any valid claim at all—to these estates," added the Marchioness. "Well, this is the 29th—to-morrow will be the 30th ——"

"And the clerk swore with a terrible oath," said Brooks, "before the time was up, he would discover the young nobleman, either dead or alive."

"He is very positive, at all events," observed Lady Bellenden, with a smile. "So far as I am concerned, I should be truly pleased to hear of my unfortunate cousin's safety, and likewise of his happiness. It is his mother the Dowager-Countess and his brother Eugene the Earl, who have carried on the suit with a merciless perseverance against me;—and I believe that poor Raymond has been more their tool than their auxiliary."

"He always spoke of your ladyship in the most respectful terms," said Brooks; "and I have frequently heard him deplore the feuds which subsisted between yourself and his family—the more so that your ladyship's self was a Montgomery previous to your marriage with the late Marquis of Bellenden."

"Poor Lord Raymond!" observed the Marchioness, rising from her seat as a signal of her wish to retire for the night: "I most sincerely hope that we shall soon receive satisfactory tidings concerning him."

CHAPTER CCXVIII.

THE RAISING OF THE STONE.

It was about seven o'clock on the following morning that the Marchioness of Bellenden came forth from the homestead of Malden Farm, where she had passed the night, and proceeded on foot towards the spot where the bridge was being built. She was attended by the faithful Margaret, her steward and housekeeper from the adjacent Hall, together with Mr. and Mrs. Brooks and their daughter.

The noble lady, clad in the mourning garments which so much became her, walked a little in advance of the rest, but every now and then turned and spoke

to them with that courteous manner and truly gracious affability which seemed to constitute a part and parcel of her very nature.

On nearing the works, it was perceived that the massive poles had been raised over the buttress and the stout winch-rope already rigged for the purpose of lifting up the crowning-stone; and in fact every preparation was completed by the masons who had risen at a very early hour in order to accomplish them. The steward was provided with a large earthen vase filled with old and new specimens of coins; and the housekeeper carried a bottle of wine which her noble mistress was to break over the head of the buttress. But there were no spectators present in addition to the persons already mentioned, inasmuch as it was not known beyond this circle that the Marchioness had even arrived at Malden Farm—much less that she contemplated any ceremonial of the nature which was about to take place.

But just as Lady Bellenden and her followers were within a few yards of the river's bank, the sounds of an approaching vehicle met their ears; and in a few instants a post-chaise emerged from the bye-lane which has before been alluded to as communicating with the road. And here we should perhaps observe that this bye-lane branched off amidst the woodlands into two routes—one effecting a junction with the high road to Birmingham and London, and the other leading to the beautiful village of Bellenden. It was therefore impossible to decide whether the post-chaise which now emerged from the lane, had come from the direction of Birmingham, or from that of the peaceful hamlet in whose church-vaults reposed the ashes of one of the proudest and mightiest families of the British aristocracy.

But the post-chaise stopped—the door was opened by a hand thrust forth from the window—and out jumped a thin, short, middle-aged man, who looked precisely what he indeed was.

"Mr. Rigden's clerk!" exclaimed Farmer Brooks, instantaneously recognising the bustling functionary as he approached the party with a quick step and an important self-complacency of manner.

"There is something afoot betimes this morning," he said, casting a rapid glance from one to another: then, as his looks settled upon the Marchioness, he gave a sort of start as if he were suddenly struck by the conviction who she was;—and raising his hat, he observed in a respectful tone, "I presume that I have the honour to find myself in the presence of her ladyship of Bellenden?"

The Marchioness bowed coldly and reservedly: for she was not prepossessed by the man's appearance, and she had no particular reason to like or esteem any one connected with Mr. Rigden.

"I have been hunting everywhere for your ladyship's cousin, the Lord Raymond Montgomery," said the clerk, unabashed by the freezing demeanour of the Marchioness; "and I cannot obtain the least clue to his whereabouts. I was at Bellenden village last night ——"

"And I was there yesterday afternoon," said the noble lady, for the purpose of ascertaining whether the clerk had heard any particulars connected with her visit to the peaceful hamlet.

"So I was told," he observed, laconically. "I slept there last night—and now I am on my way back to London ——"

"Indeed, sir, you have come out of your way, I can tell you," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "On leaving the village you should not have taken to the bye-lanes at all ——"

"I know that, my good man," interrupted the clerk: "but I chose to come round by Malden Farm this morning—indeed, I got up at five o'clock on purpose—just to make a last inquiry concerning Lord Raymond and see whether anything had transpired with regard to him since I was here the day before yesterday. Because this is the 30th: and he must know that unless he fulfils a certain duty by twelve o'clock to-night, he loses any claim which he may now possess to the objects of litigation. I therefore fancied it just possible that he might have returned at the eleventh hour, as one might say ——"

"I have heard nothing of his lordship, I can assure you," interrupted Farmer Brooks. "But I thought that you were resolved to find him out, dead or alive——"

"Upon my honour, my good fellow—and saving her ladyship's presence for talking thus familiarly," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk,—"I do really begin to feel assured that if Lord Raymond Montgomery should ever again turn up at all, it will be only as a corpse—and not as a being full of youthful vigour, and animation, and life."

"Good heavens! what makes you think *that?*" cried Farmer Brooks, while ejaculations of horror burst from the lips of the worthy man's wife and daughter.

"Oh! simply because people don't disappear in this kind of fashion without having met foul play," said the clerk. "But may I take the liberty of inquiring wherefore you are all abroad so early, and what is going on at the new bridge here?"

"Her ladyship is about to deposit a vase of coins in the hollow of that buttress," replied Farmer Brooks; "and the masons are at this moment on the point of lifting that huge crowning-stone."

"With her ladyship's permission I will remain a few minutes and witness the ceremony," said the clerk.

"I have not the slightest objection," returned the Marchioness: and with these words, she advanced close up to the spot where the masons had already begun to work the apparatus erected for the raising of the stone.

The steward, the housekeeper, Margaret, Brooks, his wife, and his daughter, all took their station at a short distance behind the Marchioness: but the attorney's clerk stood forward to contemplate the process of lifting the huge mass of granite. Having dwelt all his life in London, and having spent the greater portion of that life behind a desk, he now felt just like a bird escaped from its cage;—and while the emerald scenery of the country was most grateful to his eye, every trifling incident which he encountered in his travels became a matter of interest with him. Thus was it that like a prying and curious school-boy, he now stood gazing on the operation that was in progress; and when the stone was raised a few inches from the mouth of the buttress, he bent down to carry his scrutiny to every feature and detail of the masonry and the mason's proceedings.

"How high shall we raise it, sir?" asked young Brooks of the steward.

"About a couple of feet—or perhaps a little more," was the response. "The jar containing the coins is a high one."

Silence then ensued once more—broken only by the creaking of the winch-rope and the grinding sound of the roller round which it was slowly, slowly winding.

In about ten minutes the stone was raised more than two feet from the mouth of the buttress;—and the steward desired the masons to desist from winding any more.

"What a putrid odour there is," said the lawyer's clerk, retreating a few paces from the buttress and sniffing with the disagreeable sensation.

"So there is," observed one of the masons.

"Depend upon it there's stagnant water inside the buttress," said the steward: "and if so, the foundation of the bridge can't be right. You must look to it before her ladyship commences the ceremony."

"Here! I will soon see what's the matter," exclaimed young Brooks: and dropping down upon his hands and knees, he protruded his head beneath the overhanging stone so as to look down into the hollow of the buttress.

"Well—what is it?" demanded the overseer of the masons.

"The smell is bad enough—but I cannot see anything shining like water. And yet—there is something—but it is dark—and all huddled up——My God! yes—it is—it is—the corpse of a man!"

And as these ejaculations, vented in horror, struck thrillingly through every brain and to every heart, kindred echoes burst from the lips of those present.

"A corpse!" exclaimed the steward, springing forward.

"And it smells like one," said the lawyer's clerk.

"Good heavens! is it possible!" cried the Marchioness of Bellenden, exchanging a rapid look of deep meaning with Margaret.

"Come, now—don't stand idling there," vociferated the overseer to his men: "but lift the stone a little higher, and let some one get ready a hook and a cord."

The windlass began to groan and the winch-rope to creak again; while young Brooks, having fastened an iron hook to a piece of cord, dropped it into the buttress. The spectators stood gazing on the operations, with outstretched necks, fixed looks, lips apart, and attitudes of painful suspense; but ejaculations of horror again burst from their tongues, when they perceived by the motions of young Brooks that he was dragging up some heavy object.

And, sure enough! it *was* a corpse that the hook and the cord were now bringing to the mouth of the buttress: but how appalling was the consternation which appeared to seize upon all present, when the farmer's son exclaimed in a tone of mingled horror and amazement, "Good God! 'tis Lord Raymond!"

The Marchioness, having exchanged another rapid and meaning glance with Margaret, rushed forward as if to assure herself that such was indeed the fact: Mrs. Brooks and her daughter both became so dreadfully agitated that it was found necessary to remove them from the spot;—and the lawyer's clerk exclaimed, "Well, I declared that I would see the young lord, either alive or dead, before I quitted these parts!"

The corpse was now completely dragged forth from the interior of the buttress and stretched upon the ground. It was much decomposed: but there was no difficulty in identifying it as that of Lord Raymond Montgomery. The long fair hair, matted and damp with the clammy dews of death though it were, still remained: the apparel, soiled and even rotting in many parts as it was, was also recognised;—and, in fine, though the countenance was livid and disfigured, there could be no doubt that in the decomposing carcase which lay at their feet, the horror-stricken spectators beheld the remains of the once handsome, elegant, but unfortunate Raymond.

But in order that no evidence calculated to establish this identity should remain disregarded, the pockets of the deceased were searched. A purse full of money was found upon him—his watch was safe in his fob—and on his finger was a diamond ring of immense value. It therefore became evident that, if he had been foully dealt with, plunder was not the object of his assassins. But his papers—his letters? Ah! these were indeed found in his pocket-book: but the damp had committed such ravages upon them, that all the writing was utterly obliterated, and the documents themselves fell to pieces when touched.

And now arose the questions, "Was it really murder, or might it not have been suicide?"—and "If it were murder, who could have done it?"

"Murder—and nothing less," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk, who had all his wits about him despite the shocking scene whereof he had so unexpectedly become a witness. "Look here—the mouth is held open by a gag—something between the teeth—it seems like a bit of sponge——"

"And so it is," said the overseer. "Poor young gentleman—he has been foully murdered!"

"And it was on the very day of his disappearance that the stone was found to have fallen," observed young Brooks.

"True, lad," said the overseer. "And what's more, one of the men declared at the time that as he was coming down yon hill to his work, he saw a carriage driving away post-haste up the lane: but we didn't think much about it then——"

"And now that incident becomes of value and importance," the Marchioness of Bellenden hastened to observe. "For my part, I take the earliest opportunity of declaring that no one in this district must be suspected of the deed—no one dwelling in this vicinage must be pointed to as the supposed author of the tremendous crime! No—that carriage which was seen departing so hurriedly on the morning of the catastrophe, affords the clue—the *only* feasible clue—to the reading of the mystery; and the justice of heaven will sooner or later overtake the murderer."

"Provided the chain of evideuce is duly followed up, my lady," said the lawyer's clerk; "and I admit with your ladyship that the circumstance of the carriage is the first link in that chain. As for suspecting any of these honest people about here, it is out of the question," added the man of business, in whose mind a suspicion was already rising up,—a suspicion which, though as yet faint and vague in its inception, was still strong enough to prompt the declaration he had just made.

"I am glad, sir, that you echo my own belief," said the Marchioness, now speaking in a conciliatory tone to the attorney's clerk and abandoning the reserve she had hitherto maintained towards him. "Your legal experience is an important auxiliary in this difficult and delicate business; and you deserve the best thanks of all present for the manly and honest way in which you expressed your opinion. It would be cruel indeed if unjust suspicion fell upon any individual who could have had no earthly motive for the perpetration of this dreadful crime."

"There will be an inquest, of course, my lady," said the steward; "and then the whole matter will be duly and properly investigated. Meantime, all opinions should be suspended."

"Precisely so," observed the Marchioness. "Let the corpse be conveyed to the Hall and the usual notice sent to the Coroner. I am compelled to depart forthwith on my return to London: but should my presence be needed for any purpose, my steward will communicate with me, and in a few days I shall be enabled to revisit this neighbourhood, if required."

"And I must also depart at once," said Mr. Rigden's clerk: then, having made a low obeisance to the Marchioness, he hurried back to his post-chaise, which immediately drove away.

The corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery was covered with a sheet brought from Malden Farm, and borne upon a stretcher to Bellenden Hall. The ceremony respecting the bridge was of course abandoned under the mournful circumstances which had transpired;—and the Marchioness returned to the homestead where she had passed the night.

"Oh! my lady," said Brooks, now approaching her with anguish and dismay pictured upon his countenance,—"I hope your ladyship is well assured——"

"That you are innocent of this crime?" exclaimed the Marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "I am certain that you are, my good friend—morally certain," she added with a stronger emphasis still. "Do not alarm yourself—do not let your wife and children give way to despondency: I will protect you—because I know you to be innocent!"

"God be thanked—and heaven bless your ladyship," said Brooks, dropping upon one knee, seizing the fair hand of the Marchioness, and pressing it to his lips: then, springing to his feet again, he hurried into the adjacent room to convey to his family the solacing assurance which he had just received.

"Now Margaret," said Lady Bellenden, as soon as the noble lady and her faithful dependant were alone together in the parlour of Malden Farm,—"give me writing materials and I will leave a note for Richard, who will doubless be here in the course of the day. He must travel post-haste after us—for to-morrow will be a busy and an eventful day for us in London."

"And these poor people here, Laura?" said Margaret, in a tone of anxious inquiry.

"No harm shall be permitted to overtake them," responded the Marchioness, emphatically. "Were suspicion to involve them in any embarrassment or dilemma, the whole truth should be at once proclaimed relative to the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Yes—everything should be revealed, happen what would!"

"I am glad to hear that such is your determination, my dear Laura," observed Margaret: "and now for the letter—as I perceive that the travelling-carriage is in readiness."

The note was accordingly penned and given to Brooks to be delivered to Richard the moment he should arrive at the farm: the Marchioness then expressed her thanks to the yeoman and his family for their hospitality;—and, having once more assured them they had nothing to fear in respect to the discovery of Lord Raymond's corpse, she took her departure in company with the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER CCXIX.

A MEETING OF OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

We must now transport our readers back to London, in order to relate an incident which occurred on the same day as that which has been marked by the events just chronicled.

It was about noon—and Tim Meagles was riding on horseback along the Edgeware Road, when his attention was suddenly rivetted upon the slight and graceful form of a young lady clad in mourning. She was proceeding rapidly along, with her veil drawn over her countenance: but the beauty of her figure—the musical charm of her walk—and the sable apparel which she wore, all convinced him that she was indeed the fair young girl whom he had longed to meet once again—if no more than *once!*

Pressing his horse towards the footway, Meagles said in a low earnest tone, "Miss Foster!"

The maiden turned—gave utterance to a cry of mingled amazement and joy—and then, bounding towards Tim, took his hand and pressed it warmly.

"God be praised that you are safe and at liberty!" exclaimed the warm-hearted girl in all the enthusiasm of her fervid, ingenuous, noble gratitude.

"And you, Miss Foster—are you happy?" inquired Meagles, putting the question with an impatience and awaiting the reply with a visible anxiety which showed how deeply interested he felt in the condition of the orphan maiden.

"I have every reason to be so," she responded, throwing up her veil at the same time, so as not to have the air of treating as a stranger an individual to whom she lay under so many obligations, and whom she knew to have suffered for her sake. "But I am residing in this neighbourhood, Mr. Meagles," she added: "and although my kind benefactress is from home at present, yet she will not chide me for inviting so kind and disinterested a friend as you have proved yourself to be, to enter her mansion and rest awhile."

"I accept the invitation cheerfully, Miss Foster," said Meagles; "the more so, inasmuch as I am anxious to hear an account of any favourable change which has taken place in your fortunes."

"This is the mansion where I dwell," said Rose, stepping up to the gate of Bellenden Priory: then, ringing the bell, she desired the porter who made his appearance to take charge of Mr. Meagles' horse.

Tim accordingly dismounted and tossed the reins of his steed to the domestic,—for he had ridden out alone on this particular morning, Wasp having been despatched with a message on some important business. Rose Foster led the way across the beautiful gardens, and introduced Meagles into an elegant parlour, where she ordered refreshments to be served up;—then, having quitted him for a few minutes in order to lay aside her bonnet and shawl in her own chamber, she returned with a countenance expressing the most unfeigned satisfaction at being enabled to testify, however slightly, the sense of gratitude which she experienced towards him. But when Meagles saw that charming girl come and seat herself by his side with all the ingenuous, artless confidence which a sister shows towards a brother, he could not help sighing at the thought that the feeling which animated her was nothing more tender than a grateful friendship.

"And now, Mr. Meagles," she said, "you must permit me to declare how deep and lasting has been the sense which I have entertained of all the obligations I owe you. You have doubtless read or heard of the fearful accusation which for a moment threatened to overwhelm me ——"

"Yes—I have read all that in a file of newspapers,

since my return home," said Meagles. "And did you find a friend in Lady Bellenden—for I am aware that this is her ladyship's residence ——"

"I found a friend in the Marchioness on the very day of my most bitter need," returned the maiden. "When discharged by the magistrate from the fearful accusation to which I have alluded, I was conducted straight hither and introduced to her ladyship. She received me with open arms—and here have I since dwelt in security and happiness. No — not in perfect happiness," added Rose, hastily: "for I have entertained sore misgivings relative to yourself and the good-hearted working-man, James Melmoth. The very day after I had found an asylum beneath this roof, I explained to the Marchioness of Bellenden all the obligations I owed alike to yourself and Melmoth; and I besought her to send and make inquiries concerning you, as well as communicate to you both the fact that I had taken up my residence at her mansion. For I had heard nothing of either you or Mr. Melmoth since that day when you burst into Mrs. Brace's house to rescue me from my royal persecutor, and when the constables assailed you both with their bludgeons. The Marchioness accordingly despatched her confidential domestic Richard to execute my commissions; but on his return I was destined to hear accounts that filled me with the cruellest alarms. In Jermyn Street Richard was informed that you had been expatriated to America for seditious designs against the King; and that you had been sent off on a particular day which was mentioned by your landlady. In Westminster, Richard learnt that Mr. Melmoth had likewise been transported on a certain day by the Government authorities, and that his family had quitted their humble lodgings only four-and-twenty hours previously to my thus sending to inquire after them. Richard could not ascertain whither the poor mother and her children had gone; but he feared from the way in which the cross landlady of the lodging-house answered him, that she had behaved harshly towards them. Oh! how it grieved me to remain in that condition of uncertainty relative to those poor people! But while I was pondering upon the apparently extraordinary coincidence that yourself and Melmoth should have been expatriated on the same day and for the same alleged offence, it struck me that it was the identical day on which you had so generously flown to my assistance at Mrs. Brace's house. Oh! all the treachery of the Prince became apparent to me then in a moment—and I saw that yourself and the generous-hearted Melmoth had become involved in ruin on my account! I addressed a letter full of remonstrance—full of upbraiding—full of supplication to his Royal Highness, — appealing to him on your behalf, and reminding him that his suppliant was the daughter of the man whom his crime had made a suicide! But I did not state in that letter where I was residing; — you can full well divine, Mr. Meagles, that I dared not incur the risk of becoming the object of his base persecution any more. My letter, then, as a matter of course remained unanswered, and I continued in ignorance of the effect which it had produced—or rather, whether it produced any at all! But every now and then I have sent to Jermyn Street to inquire whether any tidings had been received concerning you—and at the same time I have not forgotten to send to the lodging-house in Westminster, in the hope of hearing intelligence with regard to that poor family! But to all the inquiries which I thus caused to be instituted, a negative was invariably returned. It must now be upwards of a fortnight since I last sent to Jermyn Street—and I should have despatched a domestic thither to-morrow or next day, had I not so fortunately and so happily encountered you this morning."

"And it is within the last fortnight that I have returned to London, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "My landlady informed me that numerous inquiries had been made concerning me while I was absent: but she did not tell me that any servant of Lady Bellenden's had called."

"Because I had charged my messengers, on every occasion, to deliver into your hands a note which I had written to you, and which was not to be left unless you were there in person to receive it. Ah! Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the young lady, "you can well understand how cautious I am compelled to be in order to avoid every chance or risk of being discovered by my royal persecutor! I had heard, through Richard, that your lodgings had been searched and your papers taken away—and I feared that if a note were left there for you, containing my address, it might perchance fall into the hands of persons devoted to the interests of the Prince."

"And you acted prudently, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "Ah! I have indeed been treated with foul ingratitude by that Prince, and with a diabolical tyranny by the Government: but in monarchical countries, all Princes are tyrants and all Governments tyrannical. Condemned without trial—sentenced to deportation upon a fictitious charge—and hurried down to Woolwich immediately after our judgment was pronounced by a secret conclave of Government hirelings and tools, Melmoth and myself were ordered to be placed on board the *Diana* frigate, which was waiting to sail for North America. I was securely lodged in the ship: but Melmoth sprang into the deep waters, and under cover of night was borne either to death or safety—I know not which! The *Diana* sailed—some weeks passed—and already were we nearing the American coast, when we were overtaken by a fast-sailing vessel which had been despatched after us, and which was the bearer of my pardon. This pardon had been procured for me by the intervention of a magnanimous friend; and now that I have returned to England, I am devoting myself to the task of persecuting this Royal Family which knows so well how to persecute others."

"And you are not aware what has become of poor Melmoth's family?" said Rose Foster, with a deep sigh as she thought of the probability of the unfortunate creatures being foodless, houseless, and friendless.

"I have not succeeded in finding the faintest clue to their whereabouts," responded Meagles: then, as he gazed intently upon the beauteous and indeed angelic countenance of the maiden, he said in a lower and deeper tone than was his wont, "I thank you, Miss Foster, for the kind interest which you have displayed on my behalf; and I can assure you that while I was a sojourner upon the bosom of the Atlantic, I often and often experienced a profound anguish at the uncertainty in which I remained with regard to your fate. I remembered—Oh! indeed, how could I forget —that you were left, when I saw you last, in the power of that princely ruffian whom I knew to be merciless and unprincipled, pitiless and inhuman. I trembled for you—my God! I trembled for you, Rose——"

"But heaven shielded me, my good friend," mur-

mured the maiden: for she felt that the answer which she had just given him was in effect a declaration that her innocence remained intact and that she had passed pure and spotless through the ordeal of temptation, persecution, and violence.

"Yes—the moment that I saw your beauteous countenance," exclaimed Meagles, "when you raised your veil ere now in the Edgeware Road, I knew that heaven *had* shielded you—for virtue, candour, and chastity are depicted upon your features the same as when I first formed your acquaintance at the beginning of this memorable year."

The partial excitement—or rather impassioned tone in which Meagles had just spoken, and which contrasted so remarkably with the low deepness of voice that he had previously adopted, struck Rose Foster with surprise;—and she gazed upon him with a half frightened, half-deprecating look.

"Do you not understand me, Rose?—do you not comprehend all I would say to you, if I could find language wherein to clothe my feelings?" exclaimed Meagles, now for the first time in his life finding himself embarrassed for words to express his thoughts. "You experience a friendship for me—do you not?"

"Oh! most assuredly—most assuredly!" cried the grateful girl. "I look upon you as a benefactor—a kind friend—a brother I might almost say ——"

"Well—a brother, then," interrupted Meagles, feeling as if he could go down upon his knees and worship that pure and innocent girl who thus proffered him as it were her sisterly affection. "But tell me, Rose—tell me," he said, with strange abruptness, "have you as yet encountered any one whom you love better than a brother?"

The maiden became scarlet: and yet she was not altogether angry. But she was suddenly overwhelmed with shame and confusion;—yes—and she now comprehended the fact that Meagles loved her, and that he was floundering in his awkward endeavours to make her aware of his passion. For a moment she had felt vexed and annoyed at the query which he put to her: but on a second thought she remembered all his chivalrous kindness toward her and all he had suffered so uncomplainingly on her account;—and her anger, dissolving like snow, was succeeded by a profound sorrow at the fact that she was loved by one who possessed such large claims on her gratitude, but whom she could not possibly love in return.

"Ah! that tell-tale blush!" exclaimed Meagles, starting from his chair and speaking in a tone of vexation. "Catch a young girl who is not in love," he muttered to himself: then instantaneously feeling how ungenerous it was on his part thus to give vent to any sentiment of annoyance towards the pure-minded artless girl, he caught her by the hand, exclaiming, "God bless you, Rose—God bless you! Not for worlds—no, not for worlds, would I say or do aught to give you pain. Poor girl! you have already seen and known suffering enough in this world—and if it lay within the power of any man to ensure your happiness by cutting his right hand off, it should be cheerfully done by Tim Meagles."

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Rose Foster as she saw by her friend's swimming eyes, and quivering lips, and muscular nervousness of features, how deeply he was moved—how profoundly affected: and she comprehended that he loved her well and that he was waiving all claim upon her heart and hand as a sacrifice which he generously made to her happiness.

"Yes—I was a madman and a fool ever to dream of possessing thee, Rose," he said, after a short pause, during which he gazed upon her with an earnest and yet most respectful admiration: "such a gem as thou art was not formed to place in a diadem made of dross, but in a crown of the purest gold! Well—may'st thou be happy, sweet girl, with whomsoever thou shalt mate thyself;—and never, never shalt thou want a friend so long as thou hast confidence in plain, blunt Tim Meagles."

Thus speaking, he imprinted a kiss upon her white and stainless brow:—nor with a maudlin prudery did she turn away. On the contrary, she received that kiss as if it were bestowed upon her by a brother,—a kiss from which she would not have shrunk had George Woodfall himself been present, and which she would not be ashamed to own when next they met.

"And now, Rose," said Meagles, after drinking a glass of the wine which had been placed on a side table, "I shall bid you farewell for the present: in a few days you may expect to see me again—and henceforth," he added, with a solemn significancy, "I shall regard you as a friend—as a sister."

Rose pressed his hand in acknowledgment of the kind feeling which prompted this assurance; and Meagles then took his leave of the orphan daughter of the suicide merchant.

"Well, I feel happier and more composed now that I have seen her," said Tim to himself, as he threaded the gardens of the Priory. "If she had accepted my suit, I should certainly have proved faithless to poor Letitia—and that would have been a scoundrel's trick on my part: but as Rose is already provided with a lover, I am saved from anything like treachery towards the Amazon. So, after all, Letitia will be my wife—a marchioness, no doubt—because it is impossible that the old king, blackguard and scoundrel as he is, can fly from his engagements with me. If he did, I could soon enforce their observance."

Tim Meagles arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion and at the garden-gate simultaneously;—and the latter being opened, he issued forth. But just as he was in the act of mounting his horse, he beheld a man with a well-known countenance passing along the Edgeware Road: and once more tossing the reins to Lady Bellenden's porter, he bounded on foot after the object of his suddenly-awakened interest.

"Melmoth!" he exclaimed, clutching the individual by the shoulder.

"Ah! that voice!" cried the working-man, as he stopped short and turned with a sudden start. "Yes—'tis you—thank God!"—and seizing Meagles by the hand, Melmoth burst into tears of joy at this most unexpected but most welcome encounter. "Where can we go to converse for a short time?" he inquired after a long pause.

"I have just left Miss Foster—she resides in that handsome building, and will be truly rejoiced to see you," said Meagles. "Indeed, not ten minutes have elapsed since we were both talking about you. Come along with me, then——"

"No—I cannot face that young creature, Mr. Meagleas," interrupted Melmoth, bitterly: and now Tim noticed for the first time that there was something wild and strange in the expression of the man's eyes.

"Why not?" demanded Meagles. "You have never done anything to injure her—and she speaks of you with gratitude and warm friendship. Indeed, she has been searching after you and yours——"

"Nevertheless," interrupted Melmoth, doggedly,

"I cannot think of appearing in the presence of the young maiden——that is to say, if she is pure, chaste, and innocent as she was when first I knew her."

"She is—she is—beyond all doubt!" exclaimed Meagles.

"Then I will not see her," responded Melmoth. "Criminal—vile—polluted—degraded—and infamous as I am," he continued, in a tone of wildly increasing excitement, "I should only shock her delicate nature—outrage her best feelings with my fearful confessions——"

"Good heavens! what has happened to you, Melmoth?—what is the matter with you?" demanded Meagles. "Come—here is a tavern close by—we will enter it—we will engage a private room—and there we can talk at our ease."

'With all my heart," replied Melmoth.

CHAPTER CCXX.

REVELATIONS OF THE MONSTER-MAN.

Upon being seated together in a parlour at the tavern, Tim Meagles was enabled to examine James Melmoth more attentively than during the hurried and excited discourse on the foot-way of the Edgeware Road. He now observed that there was not only something strange and wild in Melmoth's looks, but an expression positively sinister and ferocious: now the eyes had a fixed and savage glare like those of a tiger when gazing on an enemy whom he longs to reach but cannot—and then those balls glittered with the vacillating, changeful, but still lurid light which showed a disordered mind and unsettled reason. The man's countenance was pale, sallow, and care-worn—and the melancholy that was expressed in all the lower portion of his features contrasted strongly with the fiercer and darker passions that left their trace on his brow and lighted their fires in his eyes. As for his apparel, he was clad in a decent suit of clothes; and his personal appearance so far indicated anything but penury or distress.

"And now, Melmoth," said Tim Meagles, "when the waiter had placed a bottle of wine upon the table and had withdrawn,—"now tell me all that has happened to you since we parted off Woolwich nearly three months ago. That terrible and strange things have befallen you, I can divine too easily: your looks, my poor friend, bespeak you an altered man."

"Altered!—yes—terribly altered, Mr. Meagles!" ejaculated Melmoth, with a burning look and an iron emphasis, as he struck his clenched fist forcibly upon the table. "So altered, my dear sir," he continued, in an accent of satire and sardonism, now blending with the ferocity of his voice and making it more dreadful to hear,—"so altered, I say, that the man has become a monster!"

"What mean you?" demanded Tim, shuddering, he knew not why—but with that same instinctive feeling which causes a tremor to creep cold and clammy over a man when he enters a room where he knows there is a huge snake, and even before he has yet set eyes upon it.

"I mean," returned Melmoth, "that this accursed state of society which titled rogues, pensioned rascals, high-born demireps, and bloated hypocrites love to applaud as a consummate civilization, is nothing more nor less than the cruellest and most savage barbarism; —yes—barbarism all the more cruel and all the more savage, because it commits ten thousand crimes daily in the name of humanity, and Christian love, and philanthropy, and justice, and mercy! It plunges families into workhouses—and vaunts its *humanity!* —it dooms four-fifths of the population to misery, wretchedness, and crushing toil, and dares to talk of *Christian love* being made practical!—it fills the streets with prostitutes and mendicants, and inculcates *philanthropy!*—it hangs, transports, or imprisons men who demand their rights; and these it persecutes in the name of *justice*!—it enacts a hundred thousand laws to coerce the poor, and not one to compel the rich to do their duty—and this is *mercy!* Now can you wonder, Mr. Meagles, if a sensitive man should be goaded to desperation by such a system as this?—can you wonder if an individual, who himself abounds in Christian love and comprehends the true meaning of justice and mercy, should be driven to madness by the horrors which are perpetrated under the cover of our pretended civilization? —can you be surprised if goading tyranny and grinding persecution should pervert all feelings—change all instincts—and turn man's very nature inside out? It would be wondrous indeed if such were not the effects of so vile a system!—wondrous if the lamb did not now and then change into the lion—and man become the monster! Well, Mr. Meagles, so was it with me —and I, a man some short while since, have been turned into a monster."

"How wildly—how terribly you talk!" exclaimed Meagles, almost frightened—brave and dauntless though he naturally was—by Melmoth's words and manner.

"And yet you must prepare to hear things more wild and terrible still, Mr. Meagles," said the unhappy wretch, "if you persist in knowing my history."

"I do persist—I am anxious to hear it," returned Meagles, still with a cold shudder—as if the dreadful things that were coming already rose looming in spectral shapes and ghastly forms amidst the haze of distance. "Do not be afraid to make me your confidant: if you have committed murder, I would not raise a hand against you—no, nor even upbraid you —for I should know that you are a victim, and not a criminal—that society is the real offender, and you only the instrument. Fear not, then, to reveal all—to confess everything—and you may expect pity, but not blame!"

"But, my good friend," exclaimed Melmoth, suddenly raising his voice as if it were a whirlwind,— "you will have to listen to atrocities that will make your blood run cold——"

"Hush! hush!" said Meagles, in alarm lest the man's loud voice should be overheard.

"And your hair stand on end——"

"Hush! hush! I say."

"And the very flesh creep upon your bones!"

"For God's sake, moderate your tone."

"Ah! to be sure," exclaimed Melmoth: "I forgot that we might be overheard. But are you prepared——"

"I am prepared to hear anything, no matter how dreadful—how appalling," responded Meagles. "I shall not wince."

"Do not make too sure. Let me see what you can stand in the shape of horrors—how much your nerves can endure in the shape of monstrosities. But when did you return to London?"

"Nearly a fortnight ago," answered Meagles. "I received a pardon—a pardon for nothing——"

FERNANDA.

"Well—a fortnight ago," said Melmoth, in a musing tone. "But have you heard or read, since your return, of certain atrocities committed in church-yards,—how the dead have been dug up and horribly mutilated——"

"Yes—I have read of those frightful proceedings," observed Tim, with a cold shudder. "Have you done aught more shocking—more revolting—more unaccountably damnable than the freaks which the unknown monster has performed?"

"Ah! I see that you are not fitted to hear my tale," said Melmoth, almost contemptuously.

"Why not? Oh! but I am," exclaimed Meagles, his curiosity now becoming acutely painful and poignantly torturing. "Come—proceed."

"And if I relate deeds as frightful as those to which a faint allusion ere now made you shudder visibly——"

"I shall not be shocked—I am prepared for them now."

"'Tis well. Would you like to know, before I begin, who was the perpetrator of those horrors—the fiend that committed those ghastly deeds? If so, I can tell you—for I know him——"

"Who is he?" said Meagles, his knees quivering and his teeth chattering with cold horror.

"I!" was the terrible answer.

Tim Meagles bounded upon his seat, as if suddenly galvanised—or as if a frightful pang had suddenly shot through his entire frame.

"I told you, sir," said Melmoth, with a ferocious coolness, "that you were not half prepared to listen to such a history as mine. Farewell: I will depart!"—and he rose from his seat with a gesture of impatience.

"No—stay, I conjure you," exclaimed Meagles, now recovering himself: then, swallowing two bumpers of wine the one close upon the other, he said, "Pardon the excitement which I manifested—and believe me now when I solemnly aver that

I *am* prepared at length to hear all and everything you may have to relate."

"You are the best judge of your own nerves, after all," said Melmoth, resuming his seat. "Listen, then—and interrupt me as little as possible; because I easily lose the thread of my narrative, as my brain is not always as clear and collected as I could wish. Well, then, you remember that night on which you and I were put into the boat at Woolwich and taken off to the *Diana* as she lay at anchor. I managed to get off my chains — and, watching the opportunity, I plunged into the river. Down, down, under the ship's bottom I dived—all my wits about me—my memory as keen and my mental perception as clear while thus engulfed, as ever my faculties were strong and lucid in the soberest and calmest moments of my life. I swam under the ship in the lengthways' direction in which she lay, and emerged close by her helm. There I remained clinging to the chains of the rudder for a few minutes, while the hubbub caused by my frolic lasted. Lights were hung over — and I dived again: then boats were put out — and I dodged about the stern of the ship for upwards of a quarter of an hour — sometimes under the water, and sometimes with only just my head above it. At length I swam cautiously and quietly away—diving incessantly until I reached the Essex shore, about two hundred yards farther down than where the vessel lay. I landed and walked along the bank for upwards of an hour; till at last, in the utter darkness of the night, I fell into a deep muddy ditch. Thence I had the greatest trouble to extricate myself: and being covered with slime, I was forced to plunge into the river to cleanse myself: I suppose that my head must have struck against something—for I became insensible: and when I recovered myself, I was in a hut at the village of Gray's Thurlock, several miles farther down the river than where I had taken the path that so nearly proved fatal to me. An old waterman had picked me up as I was floating down with the tide: a glimpse of moonlight upon the water had shown him my countenance as I lay senseless on my back. On getting me ashore, he found that life was not extinct; and being a humane man (as most poor people are, by way of set-off to the hard-hearted aristocracy) he conveyed me to his hut, where he and his wife attended upon me. I recovered in a few hours: but for several days I was unable to rise from the humble pallet on which I lay stretched. At length I grew strong enough to get up; and not choosing to remain a burthen to my good friends—anxious moreover to see my wife and dear, dear children—I said I should leave them. The report of my escape off Woolwich had reached Gray's Thurlock, as a matter of course; and the old waterman suspected that I was the individual. He spoke kindly to me upon the subject—and I told him everything. Then he became a true friend to me—bestowing upon me a suit of sailor's clothing as a disguise, and giving me a few shillings to see my way clear with. I returned to London: Oh! how my heart beat—how every pulse thrilled with the fervid, joyous hope of embracing my beloved wife and little ones again. Heedless of the risk I incurred of being recognised by any hostile person who might give information to the Government, I hurried to the lodgings where I hoped to find my family. Heavens! how long the street seemed from the corner to the house—what an age it appeared before my knock at the door was answered! To clasp my wife in my arms—to embrace my little ones—to see poor baby's innocent face again—Ah! that would be a reward for all I had suffered! The door opened—and the landlady appeared on the threshold. She was frightened when she saw me—she guessed that I had escaped—and she was afraid of getting into trouble by even speaking to me. I beheld all the embarrassment of her manner—and my heart sank within me. I apprehended something dreadful: nor was I deceived in that harrowing presentiment. My family had been compelled to leave their lodging—in plain terms, they had been ejected! I restrained my fury while I put some questions to the landlady: she was frightened at me and besought me to depart, hinting that the Government officials might observe and arrest me. I saw that if I gave way to violence I should only invoke a renewal of the persecution whence I had escaped; and I accordingly maintained a forced composure. But this was all on a sudden interrupted by an outburst of bitter weeping—for my feelings overpowered me. Even the landlady, wretch as she was, seemed moved; and by way of consoling or perhaps of appeasing me, she volunteered the assurance that if any stranger called to inquire after me, she would not say that I had been there. As for my wife and family, the woman knew not where they had gone; and I departed from her presence in a state of mind which no culprit about to ascend the scaffold need have envied."

"Poor man!" said Tim Meagles, profoundly touched. "As for the landlady, she kept her promise to you, harshly though she might have behaved to your wife and children: for Miss Rose Foster has sent to make frequent inquiries at your old lodgings concerning you—and the servants who called there on her behalf never could glean any intelligence with regard to you."

"For this reason, then," observed Melmoth, laconically, "I will spare her. Otherwise I had intended to immolate her amongst the rest of my enemies. Oh! you may gaze upon me with horrified looks, Mr. Meagles: but you have tremendous things to hear ere we separate! However—to resume the thread of my story—I was telling you that I took my departure from the landlady's abode in a condition of mind not to be envied by any living being—no, not even by the most grovelling wretch that crawls upon the face of the earth, nor by the condemned felon who looks Death face to face! Oh! my poor wife—my dearly beloved children! whither had ye gone?—wherefore was I thus deprived of your love, your solace?—why were we not permitted to meet and mingle our tears? But I saw it all: I comprehended the villany that had been perpetrated. It was quite clear that the money which I had sent from Woolwich along with the letter, had never reached them:—it had doubtless been kept by the villanous peace-officer—and they were turned into the streets. O God! how bitter, how diabolical, how fiendish was the curse that rose up in my soul at that moment,—a curse menacing the whole framework of society with ruin, blood, murder, and vengeance,—such a curse, in fine, as a desperate man might be expected to vent upon a world that

had lacerated, tortured, scourged, persecuted, and goaded him so cruelly—so maddeningly! Yes—I breathed a curse——not aloud——no, it was to myself: for that curse was too awful—too hideous—too damnable to be shaped in words or clothed in language, until the mind had become familiar with it by frequent contemplation. And now, that I have so long—so steadfastly—so continuously viewed that curse face to face, I may unhesitatingly tell thee, Mr. Meagles, that it summed up all the mischiefs I would possibly work against society and all the horrors with which I could startle it. I looked upon the world as a pandemonium—and I determined to have a fiend's revenge. At all events, if this earth were not really hell already,—then I vowed to open hell at the feet of all whom my influence could reach. I wandered out into the suburbs of St. Pancras with these thoughts uppermost in my mind; and I saw a funeral pass. I beheld the mourners weeping—the friends and relatives with their countenances buried in their handkerchiefs. I heard the sobs of some of them, and thence knew that their grief was real. Mechanically I followed the funeral into Old St. Pancras Churchyard:—I saw the coffin lowered into the earth—I beheld the soil shovelled down upon it—I marked the intense anguish of the mourners. And as I thus gazed upon them, I was suddenly struck by the features of the chief mourner as he withdrew his handkerchief from his face for a few moments. Heavens! it was the peace-officer to whom I had entrusted the money and the letter at Woolwich, and who had robbed my poor family of the gold they so much wanted. Yes—the peace-officer it was: and fortunate was it that his grief was so absorbing as to prevent him from taking any notice of me—or else he might have recognised me, despite my sailor's apparel. Mingling with the spectators, I learnt that it was the peace-officer's own father whose remains had just been committed to the ground. Oh! at that moment all hell seemed to flame up and rage in my bosom: terrible thoughts took possession of my brain—tremendous ideas began floating vaguely about in my imagination, as monstrous serpents would seem in the depths of the green sea-waters. Shuddering at the appalling promptings which were beginning to influence me—goaded to frenzy by my own thoughts, and endeavouring to outstrip them, I fled from the place. For three or four days, however, I haunted the neighbourhood,—circling as it were about that lonely churchyard, as a vulture flies round and round the carcase on which it is about to pounce, each time narrowing the circumference of its whirl. At last the fearful ideas which were agitating in my brain, seemed to combine all their force—concentrate all their power—and act as a tremendous spell upon me. A violent headache—a cruelly painful nervousness—an audible beating of the heart—and a fever-heat all over my body,—these were now the principal symptoms of the frightful monomania that was gaining so appalling an ascendancy over me. It was an impulsive insanity which I could not resist,—a frenzy exercising an indomitable control over my passions, my senses, and my very actions,—the concentration as it were of all the venom, all the rage, all the fury, and all the fire of that stupendous curse which the hell of my feelings had thrown up in their despair! At length, unable to bear up against the torrent of impulses which were overwhelming me, I went and purchased a spade;—and when night came, I entered the churchyard of Old St. Pancras—I dug open the grave—I tore up the corpse of the peace-officer's father—and I mutilated it horribly with the shovel."

"Eternal God! this is dreadful!" exclaimed Meagles, bounding upon his chair, while his cheeks grew blanched and his lips quivered with indescribable feelings of terror and disgust.

"Ah! I told you that it was necessary to prepare yourself to hear appalling things," said Melmoth, with a hollow mocking laugh. "Shall I cease?—or shall I continue?" he demanded, after a pause and in a tone of indifference.

"Proceed, proceed," returned Meagles: "and you must make allowances for any display of wonder or excitement on my part. I will however restrain myself as well as I am able. Go on. You were telling me that you exhumed the corpse of the peace-officer's father—and that you mutilated it horribly."

"And the moon shone cold, serene, and placid upon the deed," observed Melmoth. "But no sooner had I accomplished it—no sooner had I hacked and hewed the senseless corse of the old man with as furious a vindictiveness and as ferocious a heartiness as if it had been the living peace-officer himself—no sooner had I thus yielded, I say, to that monomania of so frightful a character, when an awful reaction took place within me. The herculean strength that I had manifested in hollowing the grave, dissolved rapidly into a child's weakness;—the raging excitement that had hurried me along subsided into the deepest despondency;—the feverish heat that had made my whole frame appear as if every artery and vein were boiling with a lava-stream, was succeeded by a cold sweat;—and a sense of overpowering debility coming upon me, as if my very life were ebbing away, I sank down by the side of the corpse which I had mutilated. Consciousness abandoned me—and when I awoke to life again, the deep tone of the church clock proclaimed the hour of one in the morning. I had remained an hour in that profound lethargy—a lethargy so closely resembling death itself, while it lasted! And on thus returning to a comprehension of the hideous scene in which I was the principal actor—or at least, the *living* one—I was seized with a mortal terror: and snatching up my spade, I fled from the spot. For the remainder of that night I wandered about like one demented,—now under the influence of a stupendous horror—now giving way to the anguish of indescribable excruciations;—at one time rushing madly on as if lashed by invisible fiends wielding whips of scorpions—at another time dragging myself slowly and painfully along as if drooping and sinking beneath the weight of an intolerable burthen;—now gloating over the revenge which I had consummated—and then recoiling from the bare idea of so tremendous a monstrosity. In the morning I repaired to one of the low lodging-houses which abound in all the vile neighbourhoods and pauper districts of London: and there I rested for many hours. In the evening I heard the frequenters of the place talking of the hideous deed of sacrilege that had been committed on the previous night in Old St. Pancras Churchyard; and I learnt that the whole vicinage of the scene of my fearful exploit was

struck with consternation, horror, and disgust. Oh! then—Oh! then, how my heart bounded within me, as if a source of enjoyment at once the most savage and the most ecstatic were now open to my comprehension! I had longed,—nay, more—I had resolved to strike terror into the heart of society—to startle it with stupendous alarms—to dig the pit of hell at its very feet—to outrage all its decencies and violate all its proprieties! Such was my determination—and now I had discovered the means of carrying that resolve into execution. War, war, to the knife against that society which turns men into monsters and goads the best intentioned individuals to desperation:—war, war to the death against that society which is composed of selfishness, heartlessness, and injustice! Such was my motto: and all my veins thrilled with delight as, one after another, innumerable means of carrying on that war presented themselves to my imagination. It was the war of one poor outcast against the whole aggregate of society: but I vowed that the war should be terrible nevertheless! And the means to which I have alluded?—the ideas which suggested themselves to my brain?—that brain which hell seemed to fertilise at the moment! Oh! these means, I say, were ample—and I laughed inwardly with a savage triumph as I recapitulated them in detail! There was the desecration of the graves of the dead—there was incendiarism in the country—there was the assassination of solitary way-farers in lonely parts—there was the throwing of vitriol in the faces of passers-by—there was——"

"Enough—enough!" cried Meagles, starting from his seat: "I can hear no more!"—but almost instantaneously resuming his place, he said in a tone so altered that it showed how powerful was the effect which a second thought had produced upon his mind, "And yet I will hear you to the end. Proceed—and once more I demand your pardon for this interruption."

"Well, I will continue, then," said Melmoth, after a few moments' hesitation. "The thoughts and reflections of which I have been speaking, prepared me for the pursuance of that campaign which I had commenced in Old St. Pancras Churchyard; and I resolved to cumulate horror upon horror for the purpose of startling society. Therefore, when night again spread her sable wing over the earth, I took my spade and bent my way towards the eastern end of the metropolis. In Shoreditch Churchyard—a cemetery situated in the midst of a densely populated neighbourhood—I made my second assault upon the innocent, unconscious dead! When morning dawned a grave was found to have been violated—its tenant dragged up and horribly mangled. The outrage was incredible—it exceeded all possibility of belief. The rumour of the St. Pancras affair had reached Shoreditch, but was treated with ridicule: now the same stupendous atrocity was brought to the very doors of the sceptics and scoffers; yet they did not believe until they crowded to the churchyard and beheld with their own eyes the open grave, the shattered coffin, and the mutilated body! Then they were all stricken with an awful consternation—and they looked at each other in dumb horror, as if the plague had suddenly broken out amongst them. Oh! it was a glee—it was ecstacy—it was delirious pleasure for me! I went into the public-houses and heard the frequenters of those places talking upon the subject—their tones low and solemn: I passed down the streets and beheld ghastly amazement and blank terror depicted upon every countenance that appeared at a window or a door-way. Heavens! how my vengeance was working! I had been trodden upon as a worm—a miserable, wretched worm, whose loss from the social aggregate would not be missed, and who might therefore be safely trampled and crushed out of existence: but, behold! this worm had made itself potent enough to strike terror into the hearts of thousands! Was that no triumph?—was that no source of joy? Assuredly it was: and therefore you need not be surprised if I tell you that on the third night of my savage campaign, I sallied forth again—I betook myself to another cemetery—and St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green, became the theatre of my hellish revelry. Oh! then and there I rollicked like a fiend in my unholy pastime—and I vented my rage upon the tenants of two graves! Next morning the whole district was in a state of excitement as tremendous as if the mutilated dead themselves had traversed the streets in their grave-clothes. The infection of a panic terror spread over the entire neighbourhood: men shook their heads and talked of vampyres—old women spoke of gholes and human jackals. I concealed my joy beneath a composed countenance: but in my heart I was mad, frenzied, frantic with the bliss of triumph. But as I was preparing for my fourth exploit in another quarter of the metropolis, strange and awful rumours met my ears,—how the grave-yards were to be watched with blood-hounds—how man-traps and spring-guns were to be planted—and how all possible means were to be adopted to protect the dead and discover the desecrator of their earthy homes. I was struck with consternation—my courage vanished—my ferocity received a sudden check—and all my infuriate valour became deadened into a grovelling cowardice. Society was destined, then, to have a respite? Yes: and like a troubled spirit did I wander about at night—remaining all day in some obscure den, where I used to fall into a numbness of the feeling and a stupefaction of the senses that made those around me think I had become a moping idiot. But this dulness soon passed—the fearful instinct revived once more—and notwithstanding the struggle which I made to combat against the whelming tide of abhorrent impulses, I felt that all my efforts would be in vain!"

The monster-man paused in his dreadful recital—and Meagles proffered him wine. He drank it with avidity—his eyes flamed up with brighter fires—a glow appeared upon his cheeks—and unsolicited he resumed his tale of horror.

"After the lapse of some days I grew so restless that I was compelled to go out in the broad daylight—for I found it impossible to remain in-doors. I passed by a churchyard—and, behold! a sudden curiosity prompted me to enter it. I need scarcely observe that I had not carried my spade about with me since the last time I had used it: and therefore my appearance was that of a rough, weather-beaten sailor. I did not wish to enter that churchyard—but an insuperable power urged me on. I was obeying some spell more potent than my own inclinations—some supernatural influence which had more of

the demon in its nature than I had of the angel in my heart. I entered therefore that cemetery: but scarcely had I diverged from the pathway and begun to ramble amongst the tomb-stones, when an impatient voice cried out, '*Take care of yourself: there are man-traps and spring-guns planted there!*' —This fearful warning, which reminded me of a danger that I had for the moment lost sight of, made me step back into the path-way: and, looking round, I saw a man coming out of the church-porch. He it was who had given me the warning: and, as I speedily recovered my self-possession, I judged by his appearance that he was a good-humoured kind of a person. Nor was I mistaken; and we speedily got into conversation together. He told me that he was employed to remain there during the day to see that people passing through the churchyard did not move out of the path-way, as man-traps and spring-guns had been planted in consequence of the late mysterious desecration of the graves in other cemeteries. Affecting to be a blunt, off-hand, frank-speaking sailor, I soon won his confidence; and he explained to me how the spring-guns were set, with their numerous wires diverging in all directions, and how the man-traps were concealed in the grass between the graves. In fine, little suspecting that I was the monster whose hideous deeds had led to the adoption of all these precautions, the man explained everything without reserve; and, after a long conversation, I left him. During the remainder of that day I wandered about with my mind full of all I had just heard;—and the longer I reflected thereupon, the more deeply could I feel the influence of the demon winding itself as it were around my heart. Evening came—and my blood was already boiling at fever heat: a presentiment of what I was doomed that night to do arose in my mind, filling me with anguish and loathing, and making me curse the hour when I was born. I felt that I was a monomaniac—and I abhorred myself: I knew that a species of madness had overtaken me, imbuing me with appalling tendencies, but not depriving me of the faculty of deploring them. I was goaded on to insanity of action, though remaining perfectly rational in my ideas. But as the darkness of night deepened I became strangely and wildly agitated; and it seemed as if a strong hand seized upon me by the nape of the neck and impelled me onward in the particular course chalked out by an infernal destiny and against which there was no possibility of resistance. Thus was I hurried back to the den where I had been staying—and thus was I prompted to take my spade and conceal it as well as I could about my person. In like manner was I urged to a cutler's shop, where I expended my last sixpence in the purchase of a pair of scissors. Oh! truly, Mr. Meagles—truly is all this the fearful narrative of impulsive madness the most horrible—the most diabolical!"

"It is indeed, my poor friend—it is indeed!" exclaimed Meagles, who was fascinated by the appalling interest of the tale even as the bird is by the eye of the snake,—a horrible fascination whence the escape which would prove so welcome is impossible!

"But let me hasten and bring my hideous story to a conclusion," said Melmoth, with abruptness alike in voice and manner: "for I myself am getting sick of it, as I am sure you must be. Well, then, I returned to the churchyard which I had visited in the morning; and heaven knows how agonizing were the thoughts, the instincts, and the impulses which waged their tremendous warfare within my soul. Talk of the roaring, raging, conflicting billows of a whirlpool—they were naught to the battling fury of my sensations!—talk of the eddies of sand thrown up in whirling columns by the hurricane on Arabia's desert—they were nothing in comparison with my jarring inclinations! I would have given worlds to go back—but an indomitable power urged me on: I would have laid down my life to be able to turn and flee—but a destiny that knew not pity nor remorse compelled me to go forward. It seemed as if I had *two* minds—the one wherein all the better feelings of my nature had concentrated themselves: the other forming the focus of all the influences of hell!"

"And the latter triumphed?" said Meagles, in a voice that was low and subdued with mingled suspense and consternation.

"Yes—hell triumphed!" returned Melmoth, a ghastly expression sweeping over his countenance. "I entered the churchyard, though recoiling from the hideous and varied dangers which menaced me. For I knew that the spring-guns were charged ready to vomit forth death or inflict disabling wounds,—and that the steel-traps were yawning in all directions like serpents with their mouths open in the long damp grass. But hell which gave me its instincts, lent me also its cunning: and mounting upon the tomb-stones, I used them as a bridge to convey me safely over the perils that lay concealed below. Nevertheless, every sound alarmed me—filling my soul with terrors the most excruciating, as if the voice of Death were whispering upon every breeze and his foot-fall were heard in the waving of the grass. Did a dog bark in the distance, I instantaneously fancied that it was the bay of a blood-hound scenting me in my unholy work: and the tread of a passer-by in the adjoining lane was taken to be that of a pursuer. Thus was my course frequently interrupted by my fears and imaginings: but all those apprehensions proved groundless on that occasion. At last, through the faint glimmering of the moonlight, I beheld a new-made grave: and then, as the instinct of the tiger warms for blood when its prey approaches, did my soul experience its horrible longing to desecrate the earthy solitude of the dead. By the exercise of a little caution I discovered in which direction the wire of the spring-gun ran; and with the scissors I cut a piece clean out of the middle. For you must understand that the spring-gun revolves upon a swivel, and turning in the direction of the wire which is trodden upon, explodes point-blank at the trespasser: therefore, by delicately feeling for the wire and cutting a portion of it away, it became perfectly safe to tread on this particular spot whence the wire was thus removed. And now I am touching upon a sad—a mournful—a horrible episode in a narrative where all is sad, or mournful, or horrible; but you will understand how previous horrors could be outvied—so far as the magnitude of the desecration and the anguish of my soul were concerned—when I tell you that having hollowed the grave, dragged up the coffin, and torn off the lid, I beheld the marble countenance of *my own wife!*"

"Your own wife!" echoed Meagles, starting with a spasmodic shock. "This is horrible—horrible!"

"Most horrible—most horrible!" groaned Mel-

moth, now covering his countenance with his hands: and for upwards of a minute he remained in this position—silent and motionless. "I saw that it was a pauper-coffin in which she lay," he continued, at length revealing his features again — those features which were now so hideous in their pallor, so ghastly in their expression of mingled anguish and horror: "and it was not difficult to conjecture how she had died, or how her remains had found the rites of sepulture. Misery and starvation had done the former—the cold charity of the parish had done the latter. But I will not dwell upon the churchyard scene of that dreadful night. Suffice it to say that once more did the curse rise up from the depths of my soul—that curse which had sprung into existence when I found that my family had been turned adrift on the wide world: yes—this fearful curse did I now renew—adopt again—and swear to carry out to the best of my ability! I sought to steel my soul against all pity and all remorse: my wife was murdered by the cruel laws and institutions of which I had been first made the victim—and a terrible retaliation could alone appease my thirst for vengeance. Vengeance, then, would I have! Need I tell you that I restored the remains of my poor wife to their last resting-place—and that I repeated over her grave the oath I had sworn to avenge her? Then I quitted the churchyard; and at a short distance I met a well dressed man dragging himself along in a state of almost helpless intoxication. I recollected that I had no money left—and I robbed him of the little money which he had about him. He was too powerless to offer resistance—and I did uot hurt him. But I hurried away, rejoicing in this new crime: for I saw that it was useless for an outcast wretch such as I to endeavour even to be good. Nevertheless, when the excitement of these exploits began to wear away and the inevitable influence of reaction came, I once more cursed the destiny which branded me like a second Cain; and I would have given worlds, had I possessed them, to undo the deed of the robbery. But remorse was useless and unavailing: and, behold! in a few days the infernal hallucination came back again—and in the depth of the night to another churchyard did I wend my way. Once more did I pass through the hideous ordeal of a frightful conflict with all my better feelings—and once more did the infuriate demon that was within me, triumph over the last efforts of my guardian genius to save me. The wire of the spring-gun was found and cut, as on the former occasion—a grave was opened—a corse was torn up—and, inspired with a diabolical rage and a demoniac fury, I hacked and hewed it with the shovel. Then I fell into a stupor, which lasted for two or three hours—I know not exactly how long; and on starting up, I was seized with a horror so profound—an anguish so intense—a panic so insuperable, that, forgetful of the dangers which environed me, I turned to flee from the scene of my atrocious pastime. Yes—I turned and fled: but in a moment there was an explosion—I had trodden upon the wire whence I had previously cut a portion away—and my body received the contents of the accursed spring-gun. O horror! what were my feelings at that moment! Ten million harrowing thoughts flashed through my brain swiftly as a flight of arrows cleaves the air,—thoughts of capture, trial, condemnation, and death upon the scaffold! But the next instant I shook myself like a dog on emerging from the water—and though in every part of my body I experienced the tortures of the damned, I found that I was not completely disabled. Dragging myself from the grass into the pathway, I stopped for a few moments to bind up the only wound that was bleeding very seriously;—and then, with a celerity that was marvellous considering the shocking state I was in, I rushed from the scene of my crime and its punishment. An alarm was already raised in the neighbourhood by the explosion of the gun: but I got off in safety—and as the pain caused by my wounds was presently succeeded by a strange numbness all over my frame, I was enabled to drag myself along through the bye-streets into which I had entered. It was in the north-western suburbs of London that my exploit of this memorable night had taken place: and I bent my way toward the eastern districts. In fine, at the expiration of about three hours I entered the maze of wretched streets, filthy alleys, and vile courts which constitute Whitechapel; and, almost perishing with exhaustion, I sank down on the door-step of a large building which looked gloomy as a prison in the obscurity of the night. It proved to be the workhouse—and when the door opened, I demanded admission. This was granted when it was understood that I had been severely wounded,—and to account for which I invented some tale. But, behold! it was destined by providence that beneath the roof of the pauper asylum I should meet my own children, whom necessity had rendered inmates there."

"In the workhouse?" exclaimed Meagles, more and more interested in the strange, wild, and scarcely credible narrative to which he was listening.

"Yes—in the workhouse—the pauper's home!" returned Melmoth bitterly. "But I was rejoiced to meet them anywhere, poor things!—for their mother had been taken from them by the hand of Death. And then I learnt that the babe was also dead—and that a surgeon had taken the infant's corpse, doubtless to preserve it in his pharmacy: and I vowed in my soul that the barbarian should not go unpunished. I learnt also that my poor wife had breathed her last on the steps of a great mansion at the West End: and I made another vow, to the effect that the inmates of the lordly dwelling should likewise be marked out as the objects of my future vengeance. To be brief, the very surgeon who took my dead child, was one day brought by the parish doctor to see me at the workhouse; and the nature and number of my wounds led to the discovery that I was the monster whose deeds had so lately stricken the entire community with horror. I was removed to a mad-cell and treated as a maniac of the most desperate class. But a revolt of my fellow-lunatics led to my emancipation: and, accompanied by my children, I quitted the workhouse in safety. Nearly six weeks have elapsed since then——"

"And in the interval you have exercised a proper control over your feelings and your actions?" said Meagles, with an eagerness which showed how rejoiced he would be at receiving an affirmative response: for amidst all the horror and loathing which he experienced for the unhappy wretch, there was blended a deep compassion—an immense pity!

"Since that period," said Melmoth, after a long pause and in a solemn tone, while he fixed his eyes with a strange expression of dogged resolution and desperate decision upon Meagles,—"since that period I have certainly experienced no return of the horrible mania—the frightful hallucination—which urged me on to the fury of a ghole and the atrocities of a vampyre: but I still continue my warfare against the world! You observe that my appearance denotes not penury: and yet I labour not honestly to procure raiment, food, and lodging for myself and children. No—there is not a chance for honest industry in this country! I have consequently become a thief—a professional thief—and I am training my children to be thieves——"

"Good God! is this possible, Melmoth?" exclaimed Tim Meagles, profoundly excited.

"To be sure it is!" cried the unhappy man, endeavouring to smother all compunction beneath a forced and ferocious glee. "And why not? Of what use is virtue?—what recommendation is character? None at all! And do you forget that *our* acquaintance first began by means of robbery? Did I not plunder you in St. James's Square?"

"Yes—and how deeply you regretted the action afterwards," said Meagles, in an earnest tone.

"Because you were a good man—and because I was only young in the ways of crime *then*," responded Melmoth. "But *now* I am as inveterately bent upon a career of what the world calls wrong, and plunder, and spoliation, and violence, as I once was resolute in maintaining my character pure and my name spotless. "In sooth," he exclaimed, rising abruptly from his seat,—"I have a mission to fulfil—a destiny to accomplish;—and when once all my work is done, I care not how soon I leave this earthly scene of wretchedness and trouble. I am now—yes, even now preparing for a grand campaign—and you will speedily hear of the enactment of dreadful deeds. There is the surgeon who stole the corpse of my child—there are the inmates of the West End house on the threshold of which my wife sank down and died—and there is the Prince whose tyranny first of all tore me away from my family—there are all these, I say, to punish;—and none of them will I spare!"

The man spoke with a terrible concentration of bitterness: and for a few moments he paused as he bent his eyes fixedly upon Meagles.

"My good friend," said Tim, in an imploring tone, "you ——"

"Nothing you can urge, Mr. Meagles," interrupted Melmoth, calmly but firmly, "will induce me to deviate from my purpose. But with regard to yourself,—with regard also to that angel of beauty and innocence, Rose Foster,—may heaven bless you both!—may God save each of you from such miseries as I have known and such torturing thoughts as I have experienced!"

With these words Melmoth rushed abruptly to the door and sped from the room. Meagles, starting from his seat, sprang after him and implored him to remain a few minutes longer. But the monster-man, heeding him not, hastened precipitately down the stairs;—and just at the moment that Meagles reached the threshold of the door opening into the street, the unhappy being disappeared round the corner of a narrow lane on the opposite side of the Edgeware Road.

CHAPTER CCXXI.

THE EARL'S LAST ACT OF REPARATION.

On the same day and at about the same hour when the preceding incidents occurred, an event of a most serious nature took place at Stamford Manor in the vicinage of Aylesbury.

The weather was remarkably fine—indeed it was the most splendid day which had yet gladdened the Spring of 1795. All around the Manor the scenery was beautiful beyond description, exhibiting every diversity of floral colouring in the gardens, and every varied shade of green in the fields. There were the bright meadows of emerald hue—and there were the woodlands of a deeper tinge: while the dark hedges stretched out their tracery like veins upon the ample surface of the sunny pasture lands. There, like a broad riband of glittering silver, meandered the pellucid stream; and the fields, densely studded with buttercups, appeared like a green carpet all shining with an embroidery of gold. The feathered choristers filled the warm sunny air with their tuneful notes: the lambs frisked in the meadows;—and all nature, animate or inanimate, was full of cheerfulness, freshness, and beauty.

In the gardens of Stamford Manor the Earl and Countess of Desborough were walking. They were not arm-in-arm: but side by side did they slowly thread the bright gravel-paths that were bordered by beds of shining foliage and by parterres of flowers.

Nor did they look at each other: but their eyes were bent downward—and everything denoted a painful reserve and constraint which hung most oppressively about the manner, the regards, the demeanour, and the very gait and gestures of both. Yet no quarrel had taken place between them—no dispute had occurred to ruffle their temper or produce a misunderstanding. Not a hasty word had fallen from either lip—not an angry look had been exchanged: nothing, in fact, had transpired of an irritable or unpleasant nature between them in their relative capacity of man and wife. Neither was the lady now tortured by unsatisfied desires and tantalising passions—nor the nobleman shamed and goaded by a sense of humiliation and despair on that account. No: far different thoughts racked their brains and agitated their souls!

The truth was that they experienced a secret and insuperable loathing for each other,—a mingled disgust and horror against which they vainly strove, but which proved stronger than themselves: for the taint of an atmosphere poisoned by the sanguine exhalation of murder had destroyed all possible sympathy in their hearts! Deeply, fondly, madly, devotedly as the Earl had loved his beautiful Countess, he now regarded her as a murderess;—and her presence, even as she walked in all the glory of her loveliness, produced upon him a shuddering sensation as if a loathsome serpent, with a charming woman's head, were in reality concealed beneath that rustling silk and that snowy linen. It seemed to him as if there were pollution in her very touch—venom in her breath—the baleful fascination of a basilisk in her looks;—and a cold tremor, like a presentiment of coming danger, was wont to creep slowly over him whenever she

approached him. Ah! how different were his feelings now from what they were when he used to worship the very ground upon which she trod—when he was never wearied of gazing upon her as the goddess of his idolatry—and when her touch thrilled him with ecstacy and her beaming looks transfixed him with delight! But as an ungenial rain showers down myriads of poisonous insects upon the germinating plants and the nascent flowers of Spring,—so had murder sprinkled its crimson drops upon all the brightest feelings and purest affections that had ever flourished in the heart of that nobleman;—and as a blight suddenly falls upon the loveliest blossoms and the greenest leaves, turning the delicate beauty of the former into cankered rottenness and the verdure of the latter into discoloured sereness,—so had crime shed its corroding, blasting mildew upon the holiest sentiments and the finest emotions that ever harboured in the mortal breast.

On the other hand, if with the Countess of Desborough there were not the same fervid love to be crushed—the same enthusiastic affections to be blighted—and the same worship to be overthrown, there was at all events an equal amount of sensibility to be shocked and a similar delicacy to be hurt: and when Eleanor thought of her husband or beheld him approach her, she could only regard him as her accomplice in a murder! The very circumstance that he possessed all the grandest mental qualities which could inspire admiration,—that his principles were the most noble and the most exalted which could possibly ensure respect,—and that his public character as a man was the most elevated and the most enviable that could exist,—the knowledge of all this, we say, only increased the horror and augmented the disgust wherewith the Countess now regarded him. For to her contemplation the mask was torn from his countenance: she saw him *as he was*, her accomplice in a murder—and not *as he seemed to the world*, a stainless man. Although it was her hand which had perpetrated the deed, and he was merely an accessary before and after the fact, yet was not his share of the deed absorbed in the consciousness of her own transcendently superior iniquity: nor did that very chivalrous nature on his part which had led him thus to become her accomplice, —nor did an appreciation of such boundless love, we say, have any effect in neutralising or diminishing the disgust and horror which she felt towards the partner in her crime *after* that crime was accomplished.

Thus was it that the noble couple experienced a mutual loathing and abhorrence; and inasmuch as they could not possibly conquer or mitigate these feelings, so neither could they conceal them from each other. Restraint and embarrassment, coldness and reserve rapidly infused themselves into their manners—their looks—their language: so that they became afraid to exchange a glance—afraid to be left alone together—afraid to allow their very hands to come in contact!

On the present occasion they had met by accident in the garden—neither being previously aware that the other was walking in the charming enclosure at the time. And on thus meeting they had started as if each one had come suddenly face to face with a horrible spectre: then, instantaneously dropping their looks, they had proceeded together side by side along the gravel-walk, exchanging a few commonplace observations to which they gave utterance with an effort and the cold meaningless nature of which only rendered their embarrassment the more cruel—their perplexity the more painful.

"Eleanor," said the Earl, after a long pause the chill silence of which became intolerable,—"there must be an end to all this!"

"My lord!" ejaculated the Countess, with a start, as if she did not comprehend her husband's meaning: and the hurried glance which she threw upon him was instantaneously averted.

"Yes—all this must have an end some how or another," cried the Earl, in a voice of decision: "it is impossible that we can lead such a terrible existence much longer."

"A terrible existence, my lord?" said the Countess, with a sort of cold astonishment.

"Oh! do not affect inability to comprehend me, Eleanor!" exclaimed the unhappy nobleman: "your heart tells you but too well what I mean. Look you, Eleanor—we are accursed in each other's eyes," he continued, in a low, deep, hollow tone; "and until this moment we have not dared confess in words those feelings which nevertheless speak out in all our looks and all our actions. Crime, Eleanor, has opened a tremendous gulf between us —and we are not fitted to dwell together any longer."

"But if we separate," said the Countess, hanging down her head and speaking in a tone that was scarcely audible,—for she no longer affected not to comprehend her husband's meaning,—"if we separate, what will the world say?—what scandal will be created?—what suspicions may be engendered?"

"True!" murmured the Earl. "And therefore it is apparent that we must not separate—eh?" he said inquiringly.

"No—we must not separate," responded the Countess.

"Nor can we continue to live together thus!" added the Earl.

"No—we cannot live together thus," she rejoined.

And a long pause ensued, during which they walked slowly towards the house, not once glancing at each other—no, not even furtively.

"'Tis a heavenly day—a glorious day," suddenly exclaimed the Earl, as if all in a moment inspired by a joyousness arising from a sense of the beauties and glories of Nature. "The prospect from the roof of the building must be charming to a degree. Methinks that our hearts, Eleanor, may derive a balm from the contemplation of the rich and varied banquet which the hand of Spring has spread out on nature's table to feast the eye;—and it may be also that from the harmonious blending of such varied shades, and tints, and hues, our minds may glean a lesson teaching us how to smooth off the asperities of our own feelings and lead them to commingle in friendly unison."

The Countess threw a look of amazement, curiosity, and doubt upon her husband,—the longest and most earnest look which she had dared to fix upon him ever since the murder. At first she wondered what he meant by devoting his thoughts to the beauties of nature when the stern realities of the world were pregnant with so fearfully absorbing an interest for him as well as for herself: then she was seized with an anxiety to discover at what aim his re-

marks were tending;—and lastly she was plunged into a strange uncertainty as to whether he had some sinister meaning, or whether he had spoken frankly and ingenuously under the influence of an improving tone of mind.

"Do you wish to ascend to the roof of the mansion?" she asked, as her regards were once more averted.

"If you be agreeable, Eleanor," answered the Earl. "Indeed I should wish you to accompany me—for I have an idea that some good will result from the prospect that will greet your eyes on that eminence."

"Be it so, then," observed the Countess: and, with feelings vaguely alarming, though full of uncertainty, suspense, and curiosity, she began the ascent of a winding staircase which led to the roof of the mansion.

The Earl followed her;—and during the three or four minutes occupied in the task of toiling up the flight, he continued to discourse with a cheerfulness that raised Eleanor's wonder to the highest pitch and augmented her doubts to a positive terror.

"When the mind is fevered," said the Earl, "any change of scene, however trivial—any departure, however slight, from the ordinary routine, is productive of incalculable benefit. I long to breathe a fresher and purer air upon an eminence: the atmosphere was stifling in the garden below. Besides, we shall obtain a view of a range of scenery far wider than the mere landscape which is seen from the railings of our own grounds. And then, too, it seems, my Eleanor, as if we were entering upon a new footing towards each other and resolving upon the adoption of a more pleasant demeanour, by thus seeking this little change of scene together. Can you bring yourself to view it in the same light?"

But the Countess was too much a prey to her increasing wonderment and growing fears to be able

to vouchsafe any reply to that question: and in a few moments she emerged upon the leads on the summit of Stamford Manor. There was a low parapet which ran along the edge,—but so very low that it was dangerous for a person at all prone to giddiness to venture too near.

"Is not this a charming prospect, Eleanor?" exclaimed the Earl, stretching forth his arm and sweeping it slowly around as if to fix her attention upon the scenery. "But the finest view may be obtained from this point——"

And he advanced nearer to the parapet as he spoke.

"For heaven's sake be cautious, Francis!" cried Eleanor, shrinking back in the dismay which suddenly blanched her cheeks and rendered her voice tremulous.

"Is it possible, Eleanor," said the Earl, turning abruptly round and fixing his eyes full upon her, —yes, full upon her for the first time during this scene which we are describing,—"is it possible that you can entertain any apprehension for *me?*"

"Do you doubt it?" cried the Countess, returning that gaze—but gazing in mingled curiosity and alarm. "Oh! if you have brought me up here to test my feelings towards you——But, no—you would not do that," she exclaimed, her manner suddenly becoming all perplexity: then, as it merged with equal rapidity into the most poignant alarm, she said, "How strangely you regard me!—your looks fill me with vague terrors! O Francis, surely you do not intend to injure——"

"To injure *you!*" ejaculated the Earl, in a voice which immediately reassured her: and the ghastly, horrified, shuddering look which she had for a moment flung towards the abyss below, was once more bent upon her husband. "God forbid that I should hurt a hair of your head! No, no," he continued, with a wild excitement which had something of the painful joyousness and martyrised enthusiasm of self-devotion in its tone and manner,—"I would not live to make you miserable, my Eleanor—but I would die to ensure your happiness!"

"Just heavens! what mean you, Francis?" shrieked forth his wife, a strange and fearful suspicion flashing to her brain: and the perspiration started out in bead-like drops from her brow.

"Eleanor," said the nobleman, taking her hand —that hand which was not withdrawn,—and at the same time he gazed steadfastly upon her, with a desperate determination written on all his features,—"Eleanor, this is the first occasion on which we have been enabled to look each other in the face without horror, and to touch each other without loathing, since that fatal evening——"

"Yes, yes—I comprehend you, Francis," interrupted the noble lady, with a wild impatience. "But what thought—what purpose is now uppermost in your mind? Speak, I conjure you! Leave me not in doubt, I implore you!" and in the agony of intolerable suspense, she laid the hand that was disengaged upon her panting bosom as if to still the painful throbbings of the heart that beat within.

"I will explain myself in a few words, Eleanor," said the Earl, all the recent animation of his countenance being now lost in an expression of mournful and despairing resolution. "You have already assented to the proposition that we cannot live together any longer—and you have likewise declared that it would be imprudent for us to separate. In these opinions I coincide with you—and therefore neither alternative is open to us! But is there no other course left?—is there no remedy for the sad position in which we are relatively placed? We are now gazing upon each other without aversion: but it is only because feelings of a nature still more potent have arisen to supersede for the instant that mutual abhorrence and distrust which never can be annihilated altogether. No—that chilling reserve, that sullen formality, and that cold embarrassment will all come back again;—and so soon as the present excitement has evaporated, we shall once more shun each other's glance and dread each other's touch!"

"'Tis true—my God! too true!" murmured Eleanor, in a voice of smothered bitterness and agony.

"Oh! then a sacrifice must be made by one that the other may be happy," said the Earl, hastily. "And inasmuch as I have been thine evil genius, Eleanor,—inasmuch as I drew thee into a marriage which thou hast been fated to deplore from the very first,—oh! on account of all this, I will endeavour—now—at last—to make thee a signal reparation! Be happy, Eleanor—may God forgive and bless thee——"

"What mean you?" gasped the horror-stricken lady, her large dark eyes gazing upon him in ghastly consternation.

"You will make the world believe it was an accident, Eleanor," said the nobleman: then, dropping her hand after pressing it fervidly for an instant, he threw himself over the parapet.

A scream—a piercing, rending scream of anguish thrilled from the lips of Lady Desborough: and the next moment she grew rigid—transfixed to the spot with an appalling consternation,—her eyes dilated—her lips apart—her cheeks perfectly blanched—and her whole attitude that of agonised terror.

The gardeners, who were working on the grounds at the front of the house, beheld the tragedy and hurried to the place where the nobleman fell: but his head was frightfully shattered—and life was extinct! The servants rushed up to the roof to take charge of their mistress, whom they bore, raving with delirium, to her own chamber;—and the tidings of the *fatal accident* which had occurred to Lord Desborough soon spread like wild-fire throughout the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER CCXXII.

OCCURRENCES IN NEWGATE.

THE scene changes from Stamford Manor to the gloomy gaol of Newgate: but the day is still the same on which the preceding incidents took place.

It was shortly after the hour of noon; and Caroline Walters was taking exercise in the low-arched, stone-paved hall, whence the door opened into several of the felons' yards. We have already stated that the discipline of Newgate was by no

means strict at the period whereof we are writing and that money could purchase many indulgences: hence the privilege which the young woman had obtained of walking in that hall, instead of being confined to the yard allotted to female criminals.

It was now the dinner-hour. Those prisoners who received the gaol allowance, had their rations duly served out to them; while those who were able to maintain themselves were gathered at the gratings round the doors of the yard, in eager expectation of the arrival of their provender from outside. This was brought either by the waiters of the taverns and coffee-houses in the Old Bailey, or else by the friends of the prisoners;—and during the ten minutes that the process of bringing the various dinners lasted, the hall where Caroline was walking was full of bustle and animation.

She stood to watch the scene: and as the doors communicating with the yard now stood open, she was enabled to observe the countenances of the men who thronged around the iron gratings which interposed their barrier between the prisoners in those yards and the visitors, waiters, or friends who came by way of the hall. And many villanous, ill-looking, hideous faces did Caroline now behold,—faces every line and lineament of which bespoke whole catalogues of misdeeds:—but there were two countenances which struck her as being more deeply stamped with crime and more darkly indicative of human infamy, than all the rest. Indeed, it was with a cold shudder that she gazed upon those two individuals who had thus particularly attracted her notice, and who were evidently waiting with a surly impatience for the arrival of their dinner.

The friendly turnkey, of whom Caroline purchased the various privileges and indulgences which she enjoyed, was lounging at one end of the hall, keeping watch upon those persons who were now entering the prison: and the impulse of curiosity led her to accost him with an inquiry relative to the two ill-looking fellows who had so especially engaged her attention.

"Who are they, Miss?" ejaculated the turnkey, repeating the query which she had put to him: "why, the most notoriousest scoundrels in all Europe! That fellow with the savage look is called the Magsman—though his proper name is Joe Warren: t'other chap is called the Big Beggarman—though his real name is Stephen Price. They're going to be tried by the Admiralty Court for piracy, murder, and God knows what all. That fellow the Magsman once escaped out of this gaol in a most extraordinary fashion——But see how savage he and his pal look because their dinner hasn't come yet. They're the only two men waiting at the iron bars—and won't Carrotty Poll catch it when she comes?"

"Who is the female you have named?" inquired Miss Walters.

"The Big Beggarman's daughter," responded the turnkey. "She always—or nearly always comes herself with the dinner——"

"I suppose she lives hard by, then?"

"Not at all, Miss. She keeps a low public at Horslydown: but she generally comes up to see her father and his pal at mid-day, and so she brings in their dinner with her. Lord bless ye, Miss! there's no want of money in that quarter—and you'll presently see her come with a devilish nice dinner for those rascals—a pair of fowls with broiled ham, may be—or a pigeon pie——But here she is!"

"Good morning, Mr. Pigman," said Carrotty Poll, bestowing this passing compliment upon the turnkey as she entered the hall at the moment: then, hurrying towards the grating, she deposited on the ground the heavy basket which she had brought with her.

"Now, Miss," said the turnkey, in a hurried whisper, to Caroline Walters, "if you want to hear Carrotty Poll catch it, you'll just creep behind that stone pillar—and I'm blowed if you won't be amused."

An unaccountable impulse urged the young woman to adopt the hint which Mr. Pigman thus gave her in a jocular mood;—and advancing down the hall, she turned aside mid-way and posted herself behind the massive stone pillar that was nearest to the particular grating where the expected colloquy was to take place.

"Well, Poll," said the Big Beggarman, gruffly, "what the devil has made you so late—eh?"

"Because I've been making inquiries about the matter you told me of yesterday—and that's why," answered the red-haired young woman in her sharp vixenish voice.

"And what's the result, gal?" demanded her father.

"Why, I've found the queer Christian name in one of the fashionable books that contain all the noble and great families of the country," answered Carrotty Poll.

"Well—and who owns the name?" asked the Magsman. "Lord! how long the gal is giving us an explanation!"

"Because I'm out of breath with running on account of being so late, and also with lugging this heavy basket along from the tavern over the way. But if you'll give me time I'll tell you all about it."

"Go on," said the Magsman and the Beggarman, both as it were in the same breath.

"In the first place, then," continued Carrotty Poll, "I took with me the lad Alfred that I've spoken to you about—the same who did the business for Lord Florimel up at Rigden's——"

"Yes, yes—we know what you mean," exclaimed the Magsman: "you've told us all about that business already. By the bye, I suppose Florimel paid you devilish handsome for getting him back his papers from Rigden——"

"Five hundred guineas for that business, and a couple of hundred for saving Pauline Clarendon from the power of the Prince—seven hundred in all," said Carrotty Poll, with a chuckle: "and so that's a pretty little sum to add to what we had already mustered up to help us on in the world when we emigrate."

"To be sure," said the Magsman, with a chuckle: "and we musn't forget that my dear delectable wife, Mrs. Brace, as she chooses to call herself, contributed a thousand pounds t'other day towards that sum. It was lucky she was made to shell out in that manner just before she got lumbered for the murders. Who the devil would ever have thought that she had pluck enough to do such things? And isn't it odd that we should both be in lavender at the same time—she in one yard, and me in another? I wonder whether she ever in-

quires after me," added the Magsman, with a coarse laugh.

"Oh! we ain't talking about your splendid wife now, Mr. Warren," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish petulence. "I was going to observe, when you interrupted me, that there's no harm in increasing our funds as much as possible: and indeed this was the very self-same remark which you made yesterday when you and father told me for the first time all the curious details about your adventures down in the country three months ago. Perhaps the clue which I have already succeeded in obtaining, in pursuance of all you thus told me, will enable me to push the investigation to the end."

"And if you should find out the parties who were engaged in those adventures in the country," said the Magsman, "it may be worth many thousand pounds to us. I told your father so at the time—didn't I, Stephen?"

"You did, Joe," was the answer. "And let me see—the three distinct clues which we had, were the lady's queer Christian name—the signet-ring taken off the finger of the dead body in the vault—and the fact that the old woman at the last cottage we stopped at, called our masked employer '*my lord.*' Those are the three clues—and the only three that we possess——"

"Well, but I think that they will prove sufficient, at least to put us upon the right track towards discovering the whole mystery," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "But as I was telling you just now, I took Alfred with me to a bookseller's at the West End—and under pretence of buying the fashionable guides, he looked over them well. He found the name of *Fernanda;*—and it seems that the lady who bears it is a young one—her surname is *Aylmer*—and she is related to the Earl of Desborough, the Earl of Montgomery, the Marchioness of Bellenden, and other noble personages. Other inquiries which I afterwards made, led to the information that this Fernanda Aylmer is now Lady Holderness: and from what I have gleamed of her personal appearance, her hair is of a dark glossy brown—her eyes a deep blue—her complexion is brilliantly fair——"

"Just the description of the masked lady of our adventure so far as we could catch a glimpse of her features at all," exclaimed the Magsman. "There can be no doubt that you have hit upon the right Fernanda, Poll: besides, the name is so very uncommon——"

"And more than that," interrupted the red-haired young woman, "the crest on the signet-ring which you gave me is that of the Bellenden family, to which Lady Holderness is related."

"Ah! now we are indeed getting into the right track," said the Magsman. "What do you think, Stephen, if Poll was to go straight to Lady Holderness's house—demand an interview with her—accuse her point blank of being the lady who enticed the young gentleman from the farm-house, and whose name he called out in his anguish just before we threw him into the hollow buttress of the bridge——"

"No—no," interrupted the Big Beggarman; "we musn't adopt any plan without mature consideration. I don't approve of Poll's going on a mere hap-hazard adventure to Lady Holderness——"

"Well, let us think over it until to-morrow, Stephen," said the Magsman. "At all events I feel pretty sure we're upon the right track to unravel the mystery of the murder at the bridge, the shifting of the coffin-plates in the vault, and the altering of the register in the vestry. I really can't help recapitulating all those incidents—they were so very singular!"

"I was told this morning," said Poll, "that Lady Holderness is engaged with her cousin Lord Montgomery in carrying on a law-suit against that same Lady Bellenden whose crest is on the signet-ring. The suit is all about the family estates of the Bellendens in Warwickshire——"

"And who can tell but that the forgery committed by the masked lord in the vestry was somehow or another connected with this law-suit?" exclaimed the Big Beggarman.

"And also the substituting of a new coffin-plate for an old one?" added the Magsman. "Perhaps the young fellow that was murdered too, might have been interested in the case——"

"And so after all it's as likely as not that the lord who employed us and who played us such a scurvy trick about our embarkation for America, was the Montgomery of whom Poll has been talking," said the Beggarman.

"Well, I think it's likely. But Poll must go and make farther inquiries this afternoon," observed Joe Warren. "And now my dear," he continued, addressing himself direct to the red-haired young woman, "tell us what you have brought for our dinner—for I should think it must have got cold while we have been chattering here."

"It's a cold veal pie, Mr. Warren—and so there's no harm done," said Poll. "A cold veal pie, with lots of hard-boiled eggs in it and nice seasoning, and a capital salad with mixture, won't prove amiss perhaps."

"Provided there's enough of the bingo to wash it down, gal," said the Beggarman.

"Well, there's a bottle of brandy," she replied: "and now, if you will hold out your hands, I'll pass the things through the wicket."

Caroline Walters perceived that the conversation between the two ruffians and the red-haired young woman had taken leave of the topics which had so unexpectedly and so strangely proved interesting to herself: and retiring from behind the pillar, she walked slowly towards the end of the hall, meditating upon what she had just heard.

Our readers will be pleased to recollect that when Caroline Walters, disguised as Rao the East Indian page, was in the service of Lord Florimel, she one evening called at the mansion of Lord Montgomery in Grafton Street. On that occasion her interview with the Earl was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Rigden; and she was desired to step into an adjacent room while the nobleman received his professional adviser. The conversation turned partially upon the law suit which the Montgomerys were waging against the Bellendens; and the names of Fernanda and Lord Raymond were incidentally mentioned during the discourse. Not a single word of all which passed on that occasion between Eugene Montgomery and Mr. Rigden was lost upon Caroline: she listened with the deepest attention, although she did affect to start up from a nap and rub her eyes drowsily when the Earl opened the door to tell her that the attorney had taken his departure.

Thus was it that Caroline had already obtained an insight into the particulars of the law-suit: and now,

after the discourse which she had overheard between the Magsman, the Big Beggerman, and Carrotty Poll, she had no difficulty in arriving at the same conclusions to which indeed those individuals also came—namely, that the Earl of Montgomery and Fernanda were the employers of the two men in their country excursion, that Lord Raymond was the victim at the bridge, and that the proceedings in the vault and in the vestry of the church bore reference to the pending Chancery suit.

All these details were of importance to Caroline,—not only to aid her in wreaking the fullest measure of vengeance upon Fernanda, but likewise to convince the world that the young lady was capable of the blackest turpitude which could possibly be imputed to her. But if her eaves-dropping behind the pillar had made her acquainted on the one hand with particulars thus useful and important to her purposes, it had nevertheless on the other hand brought to her knowledge a fact which filled her heart with rage. This was the stratagem which had been adopted, through the agency of Alfred, to recover the stolen deeds from Mr. Rigden, and restore them to Lord Florimel,—and when Caroline thus found that the mistrust with which that sickly-looking lad had inspired her at the lawyer's office, was fully warranted, she bit her lip with rage and cursed the want of caution which on Rigden's part had thus enabled Florimel to triumph in the long run.

After walking to and fro in the hall for a few minutes to collect her ideas and compose her excited feelings as well as she was able, Caroline Walters retired to her cell, where she penned the following note to Mr. Rigden:—

"The boy Alfred who stole the papers, was employed by a woman belonging to an infamous gang some of whom are at this moment in Newgate. The woman's name is Price; and she keeps a low public-house in Horslydown. Perhaps you can find some means of avenging yourself on the wretches for the loss of the papers?"

Having sealed and addressed this letter, Caroline sent it to the post by the friendly turnkey, who rejoiced in the name of Pigman: and when this functionary returned after executing the commission, she besought him to grant her an immediate interview with the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

This favour was accorded without much difficulty; and Caroline, upon finding herself alone with Arthur, proceeded to relate all that she had learnt within the last hour relative to Fernanda, as well as all that her own suspicions or conjectures furnished in addition. Arthur took down in writing everything that was thus detailed; and after a long interview Caroline was warned by the appearance of the turnkey that it was necessary to take leave of the young gentleman. They accordingly separated; and Miss Walters was returning to her own cell in company with Mr. Pigman, when just as they entered the stone corridor leading thereto, she found herself face to face with the milliner of Pall Mall.

It must here be mentioned that Mrs. Brace had purchased leave and license to take exercise in the stone hall, in the same way as Caroline Walters; and she was proceeding thither, followed by a turnkey at some distance, when she thus encountered the young girl.

"Ah! I am glad that I have met thee, foul procuress!" said Caroline, in a voice of smothered passion. "Thou wilt go to the scaffold—and it is I who am the means of sending thee thither!"

"Traitress! thou also shalt hang to the gibbet," retorted the milliner, her eyes glancing with an infernal rage and her white lips quivering nervously. "'Twas I who informed against thee, as thou didst against me!"

"Ah! but I shall not hang, thou she-devil," returned Caroline, in a voice of malignant triumph and savage taunting; "for I can prove mine innocence—and that is more than thou canst do!"

"Wretch! thou shalt die by some means, if not by the executioner," rejoined Mrs. Brace, her whole form trembling with the demoniac passion that made her contenance white and ghastly and her features distorted and hideous.

"I shall live to gloat over thy writhings and convulsions on the scaffold, base procuress!" returned Caroline, the words hissing from between her lips as if laden with the venom of the serpent.

"Little harlot, who murdered Mrs. Lindley!" muttered the milliner between her set teeth.

"Wife of the Magsman, Joe Warren," cried Caroline, in a tone of bitter contempt and cutting scorn: "your husband was talking of you ere now!"

"Ah! would'st thou push me to extremes?" said the milliner, in a thick voice: and at the same moment she drew from her person something which flashed brightly across the eyes of Caroline Walters.

"Murderess!" ejaculated the girl, recoiling in dismay from the blow which she saw coming: but the next instant a long sharp-pointed pair of scissors which the milliner wielded, was plunged deep into Caroline's bosom.

With a low moan she sank at the feet of the infuriate Mrs. Brace, who was instantaneously seized upon by the turnkey that happened to be nearest at the moment; and while the vindictive woman was dragged away to her gloomy cell, the wounded girl was conveyed with all possible care to the prison-infirmary.

CHAPTER CCXXII.

THE DEATH BED.

It was late in the evening of the memorable day of which we have been writing, that the chaplain of Newgate called at the mansion of Lord Florimel in Piccadilly; and, on obtaining an audience of the young noble, the reverend gentleman informed him in a few hasty but impressive words that Caroline Walters, mortally wounded and at the point of death, implored a last interview with his lordship. The naturally generous-hearted Gabriel was not the man to refuse such a prayer;—and he at once agreed to accompany the chaplain to Newgate. On their way thither the reverend gentleman informed Lord Florimel that the blow which had stretched the unfortunate young woman upon the bed of death, was dealt by Mrs. Brace; and the young patrician experienced a kind of dismay as he reflected upon the intimacy which had once subsisted between himself and the wretched milliner.

On arriving at Newgate, Lord Florimel was conducted into a chamber belonging to the infirmary-

department; and there, upon a humble pallet, lay Caroline Walters. The signs of death were already imprinted on her countenance, from which the vital colouring had entirely fled: a dimness was visible in the pupils of her eyes—her lips were almost bloodless—and her whole appearance was marked with an air of langour, weakness, and depression.

A pang of remorse shot through the heart of Lord Florimel as he entered that infirmary-chamber: for his conscience told him that his perfidy had in the beginning led the young girl astray from that path which she might have pursued innocently and happily, and placed her in the course which was thus destined to terminate violently and prematurely.

On the other hand, an expression of penitence and reviving affection appeared upon the countenance of the dying girl as Florimel, with an air of contrition and grief, approached the bed whereon she lay:—and he perceived at once that it was not to upbraid him with her last breath that Caroline had sent to beseech his presence there. The chaplain who introduced the young nobleman to the chamber, and the nurse who was in attendance upon Caroline, now withdrew; and Lord Florimel remained alone with the dying girl.

He glanced uneasily around the room, which a single candle lighted: it was naked, dull and cheerless in aspect—and a cold shudder passed over his form at the idea of any one's last moments being expended there. Then having thus slowly made the circuit of the chamber with its dingy walls and scanty furniture, his looks settled upon the countenance of Caroline Walters—and he saw that her gaze was fixed earnestly and intently upon him. In that gaze there was a professed mournfulness mingled with a certain tenderness which appeared to deprecate all angry feeling;—and stretching out her hand towards the young nobleman, she said in a faint low voice, "Sit down by my side—I have much to say to you ere I die!"

The plaintiveness of the tone in which these words were uttered and the pathos of the words themselves, went to the very soul of Lord Florimel. Bursting into tears, he took the proffered hand, and sank down on his knees by the bed-side, exclaiming, "Forgive me, Caroline—forgive me for the cruel wrongs which I have inflicted upon you!"

"This is the time for mutual forgiveness, Gabriel," she murmured in her silver voice, that was low and tremulous with emotions profoundly stirred and with the attenuating effect of coming dissolution. "Until within the last few hours I have hated you as cordially as I once loved you: but the approach of death—the counsels and the consolations of the kind-hearted chaplain—and the whisperings of some secret, unknown voice which appears to have arisen in my soul since the moment that I found myself standing upon the threshold of the grave,—all these influences have worked a mighty change within me—and I feel that I shall die more resignedly and more happily if we express and record a mutual pardon for the past!"

"Heaven knows how cheerfully—how willingly—how sincerely I forgive all and any injuries which you have endeavoured to inflict upon me!" exclaimed Florimel. "But can you, Caroline, as readily and as unfeignedly pardon me for the first tremendous wrong which I perpetrated against you?"

"Yes—I forgive you—unfeignedly forgive you, Gabriel," replied Caroline, her looks confirming her words.

"Then may heaven forgive *you* also the misdeeds which weigh upon your soul!" exclaimed Florimel, with a sacred fervour and a pious solemnity such as he had never before expressed or felt, but which were not the less sincere on that account: and having pressed the dying girl's hand to his lips for a moment, he rose from his knees and sate down on a chair by the side of the bed.

"I despair not of the forgiveness of heaven, Gabriel," said Caroline, in a firmer tone and with a temporary flush of conscious innocence upon her cheeks: "for I have naught to answer for save that frailty into which my love for you betrayed me, and that thirst after revenge which your infidelity engendered in my soul."

"How?—what mean you, Caroline?" exclaimed Florimel, regarding her with mingled joy and astonishment. "The crime of which you are accused—which has made you an inmate of this dreadful place——Oh! how happy should I be to learn that you are innocent——"

"I *am* innocent, Gabriel!" said the young woman, in a tone and manner that were imbued with all the deep feeling and profound solemnity of unquestionable truth. "Yes—I am innocent—and my guiltlessness will be shortly made clear to the world. Oh! if God would only spare me until that end shall have been achieved, I should die resignedly—nay, happily——"

"But the real perpetrator of the deed?—the murderer of the midwife?" exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively, and still under the influence of an immense surprise, although he doubted not for a moment the truth of all that the dying girl was telling him.

"The Hon. Arthur Eaton, who is likewise the victim of circumstantial evidence, knows everything," returned Caroline; "and he will make his own innocence and mine apparent at the same time. Let us not therefore dwell upon the subject: suffice it for you to be convinced that I am innocent of the stupendous turpitude imputed to me:—and without a sensation of loathing and horror may you therefore remain at my bed-side to hear the confessions which I am anxious to pour forth in your ears."

"Even had you been guilty of that crime," said the young nobleman, "I should have experienced no feeling of abhorrence towards you now: but I should rather have continued to look upon myself with additional upbraiding and reproach, inasmuch as I was the author of your ruin, and every incident that has since marked your career, whether misfortune or guilt, must have been regarded as the unavoidable associations of that destiny which my conduct shaped and formed as it were for your guidance. But these revelations whereof you have spoken, Caroline——"

"Listen—and you shall hear," said the dying girl. "Draw close to me, that I may not be compelled to raise my voice too loud—and interrupt me as little as you need. I shall surrender up my breath all the more happily if I make a complete atonement for any injuries which I have sought to inflict upon you. For now," continued the young

woman, gazing affectionately into the face of her seducer,—"now that I feel the approach of dissolution and that I must speedily quit this earthly sphere for ever, I experience a return of that love which my heart once cherished so fondly, so fervently for thee! Ah! the presence of death doubtless works grand and signal changes in the human mind,—quenching the fires of evil passions, and reviving the flames of those which were wont to warm the heart with a holier and purer influence! I could not leave this world in anger with thee: I longed to breathe the word '*pardon*' with my own lips, and hear it fall from thine. My wish has been accomplished — and I feel happier — Oh! much happier! But let me not waste precious time nor my own energies in giving expression to my feelings: rather let me at once proceed to deal with facts. Gabriel," she continued, in a more measured and a deeper tone, while she gazed half timidly up into his countenance, as if now shrinking from the task which she had imposed upon herself,—"Gabriel, you can but too easily conjecture the motives which led me to seek an introduction to your dwelling in the disguise of the black page Rao. I will not do more—at least for the present—than admit that I was animated by no friendly motive towards thee! You remember that shortly after I managed to obtain admission into your establishment, the Earl of Montgomery called upon you. While you were together I had occasion to enter the apartment to bring you a letter; and just as I opened the door I heard you say that all your papers and parchments were kept in a tin-box under your bed. The words struck upon my ears like a clue to something that was as yet unrevealed to me, but which I should sooner or later find out; and perceiving that your conversation with Lord Montgomery had taken a serious kind of a tone, I listened at the door of the apartment. First I heard the Earl speak mistrustfully of me;—and subsequently came the long narrative of love and mystery which you recited to the Earl, and which was elicited by the incident of the masquerade ticket and the blue domino. When you summoned me and gave orders that the domino should be burnt, I saw by Lord Montgomery's manner that he was chagrined and vexed: and I was struck by the suspicion that he wished to take your place at the masquerade. At the same instant the thought flashed to my mind that the whole affair might be rendered available to my vindictive purposes; and I resolved at all events not to burn the blue domino. As Lord Montgomery was taking his departure, I spoke to him in the hall; and he bade me come to him at Grafton Street in the evening. Thither I accordingly repaired; and accident led me to overhear a conversation which took place between himself and Mr. Rigden. This discourse related to the law-suit which Rigden was then about to commence against you; and I heard enough to convince me that it was already in my power to injure you seriously, if not ruin you completely. When Rigden had taken his departure, I explained my business to Lord Montgomery; and he gladly accepted my proposal to give him the blue domino which you had ordered me to burn."

"Ah! and it was Montgomery, then, who played the part of your accomplice at the masquerade!" cried Florimel. "But did he encounter the Unknown on that occasion?"

"Most assuredly—and it was for this purpose that he went thither," returned Caroline Walters. "Meanwhile Pauline Clarendon had fallen into a snare which I had laid for her; and her jealousy being excited by an anonymous letter——"

"I am acquainted with these particulars, Caroline," said Florimel: then, after a brief pause, he added, "Pauline and I are reconciled—and she has told me everything relative to the part which she was induced to play so painfully in the masquerade."

"I am glad that you are reconciled—sincerely, unfeignedly glad," observed the dying girl, in a voice expressive of deep feeling. "May you be happy together—oh! may you be happy together!" and the tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

"You performed the part of a Gipsy on the occasion to which we are alluding," said Florimel, after another pause, which was longer than the previous one. "But let us not dwell upon this subject——"

"You understand that my motive was to estrange you completely from Pauline," resumed Caroline, with the abruptness of one who seeks to dispose as quickly as possible of an unpleasant explanation which it is nevertheless requisite to make. "I saw that you loved her—loved her devotedly; and as the consummation of your unhappiness was then, alas! my fixed, my inveterate, and my implacable aim, I had greedily seized upon the incident of the masquerade to cause a breach between yourself and that amiable, unoffending young lady. But, oh! this was not all the mischief which I worked against you, Gabriel," continued the dying girl, her cheeks faintly flushing for a moment with the excitement of her feelings. "I entered your chamber by night—I took your keys from beneath the pillow while you slept, and I purloined the documents from the tin-case under the bed. Those deeds I conveyed to Rigden, who did not hesitate to receive them at my hands. Ah! my vindictive hatred towards you *then* was fierce—ferocious—intense—diabolical. I would have sold myself to Satan in order to wreak upon your head a vengeance more refined, more excruciating, more torturing than any that unassisted human nature could devise. And do you not recollect the day when I told you the fabricated tale of a seduced and deserted sister? Oh! I saw you writhe and wince beneath the scourge of scorpions with which I was then lashing you so mercilessly!"

"And, by heaven!" exclaimed Florimel, "I suspected at the time that there was something sinister in the meaning of the tale—something darkly and terribly significant in your looks and words——Oh! yes—I did indeed writhe and wince, as you express yourself, Caroline—and even in that incident were you signally avenged!"

"The conversation was interrupted at the time by the arrival of your solicitor, Mr. Cresswell," resumed Caroline. "He brought you the intelligence that Mr. Rigden had given him notice of the suit—and you repaired to your chamber to fetch the deeds. I accompanied you thither:—and now does a pang of bitter remorse shoot through my heart, as I call to mind the fiendish satisfaction which I experienced when the word '*Ruin*,' bursting from your lips, fell upon my ear! But merciless as an avenging angel, I wrote to Mr. Rigden to inform him of the fact that the deeds had been missed, and that their loss had filled you with dismay. On the same evening you went out——"

"Yes—I remember," said Florimel, in a musing

tone: "it was to Horslydown. But proceed Caroline."

"During your absence a tall footman brought a note to the house," continued the dying girl; "and I suspected that he was the same whom you had mentioned in your narrative to Lord Montgomery. Indeed, from the studious manner in which he averted his countenance as he delivered the note and a message, I felt but little doubt upon the point; and the nature of the questions which you put to me on your return, ratified my suspicions. The tall footman came back at midnight: you went away with him—and I determined to follow. To be brief, I succeeded in obtaining an entrance into the darkened boudoir at the same time that the unknown introduced you thither!"

"Good heavens! then you know who she is?" exclaimed Florimel, in mingled astonishment and curiosity. "Tell me, Caroline—who is the woman that was enabled for a season to render me the slave of her fascinations—the victim of her magic allurements——"

"Patience Gabriel — patience — and you shall know everything!" said Miss Walters, who appeared to acquire an increase of energy as she thus progressed in her explanations. "You doubtless remember the discourse which took place between yourself and the Unknown on the occasion to which I am referring. She told you how passionately she loved you—and the sincerity of the avowal might be gleaned from the fervid tone in which she spoke, more even than from the fond ardour of her caresses. The latter might have arisen from sensuous passion: but the voice received its intonation and its accent from a feeling that was calculated to survive satiety. Here, then, was another rival for me: and I found that you were well disposed to plunge head-long into the vortex of pleasure, mystery, and folly thus darkly but enchantingly opened at your feet. When completely under the influence of her charms and her fascinations, you were gradually drawn on to give an attentive and even eager ear to the avowals which she made relative to her hope of becoming your bride. She stipulated her conditions—saying, '*Make me your wife, and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank.*'—I saw that you would yield; for it was easy to perceive how powerful, how subtle, how well applied were the syren's fascinations, and how weak was your power of resistance. On quitting the house at four o'clock in the morning, I did not fail to examine it sufficiently to enable me to recognise it again——"

"And that house—where is it?" demanded Florimel. "Tell me, Caroline—tell me—I am dying with impatience!"

"Would you return to your syren-charmer?" asked the dying young woman, in a tone of mild and melancholy remonstrance.

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated Florimel, with the accent and manner of the firmest resolve. "It would be as impossible to entice an angel to sin, as for that Unknown, with all her witcheries and wiles, to allure me back to her arms. No—the dream is dissolved, for ever—the spell is broken, never to be renewed—the magic influence has disappeared before the talisman of Pauline's virtuous love!"

"I am rejoiced to hear you speak thus resolutely—thus firmly," said Caroline: "for I shall die with your name upon my lips—accompanied by a blessing—and God grant that you may henceforth prove stronger than all the fascinations, allurements, and blandishments which a refined sensuality can possibly devise or a consummate artfulness be enabled to practise. Let me, however, hasten to the end of my explanatory remarks: and then, Gabriel—and *then* will I breathe in your ear the name of her who must not any longer be an Unknown to you."

"Proceed, Caroline—proceed," said Lord Florimel, somewhat impatiently.

"You remember that one evening, when attired in female apparel," resumed Miss Walters, "you were insulted in Chancery Lane and that you took refuge in a lock-up house. I was following you at a distance—as was frequently my wont, though invariably unperceived by you. You remained in the lock-up house; and at the expiration of an hour or two I became wearied of waiting for your reappearance. The bailiff's follower was standing at the door; and from him I learnt that you were to pass the night at the establishment, in company with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Letitia Lade. Further and more particular inquiries, which I caused to be made, led to the discovery that you were actually sharing the same bed-chamber with those ladies—although of course your real sex was unsuspected by either the bailiff or his man. Here was a glorious opportunity, as I thought, to advance another step in the working out of my revenge! Straitway to the West End did I repair—and a note, which I hurriedly penned and left at Carlton House, informed the Prince of Wales that Lord Florimel, disguised in female apparel, was sleeping at the sponging-house along with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. But his Royal Highness was not at home when the note was delivered; and I waited in the vicinity of Carlton House until two in the morning to watch for his return. I fancied it to be quite probable that if he felt outraged by the conduct of Mrs. Fitzherbert he would at once repair to the lock-up house for the purpose of detecting her in your company: but in this calculation I erred. The Prince returned to Carlton House soon after two, and did not issue forth again so speedily as I expected. I accordingly repaired home to Piccadilly, and lay down until seven o'clock. Then I retraced my way to Chancery Lane to watch the issue of the adventure. Soon after nine the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough arrived at the lock-up house—and a little while later his Royal Highness himself made his appearance in a plain carriage. These arrivals I beheld from the window of a neighbouring coffee-house, where I had taken my post. After a time, Lady Desborough and yourself came forth. You entered her ladyship's carriage: and it was evident from her bearing towards you that she fancied you were really what you seemed — an elegant lady. Or else, the Countess must be the veriest hypocrite in existence——"

"No: she believed that I was Miss Plantagenet," observed Florimel. "But pray proceed, Caroline."

"Well, you drove away in company with her ladyship; and I followed in a hackney-coach at a distance. You repaired to Bellenden Priory——"

"Yes," exclaimed Florimel: "and now——"

"Patience, Gabriel — patience," said Caroline. "Three days elapsed after that incident—and you

did not return home. I felt assured that the syren had enmeshed you in the trammels of her seductive blandishments—and once more did I penetrate into the boudoir of darkness, where mysterious enjoyments and raptures had intoxicated you aforetime. And you were there,—yes, there—in the dense obscurity of the place, and attended by its presiding genius. Most interesting, too, was now the conversation which took place between you. The Unknown brought all the artillery of her wiles—all the seductive powers of her language—all the lavish fascinations of her tone and manner,—and all the insidious allurements of her caresses, to bear upon your mind and temperament on that occasion. And attenuated as you were by indisposition, it was no wonder if you yielded with more than even your characteristic readiness: and in the infatuation of your soul, you vowed to pay a blind and implicit obedience to the dictates of the Unknown. Could you not see that when she enjoined you to leave London and repair to Dover, it was to remove you to a distance where the chance of being reconciled to Pauline was immensely diminished?"

"I had no time for reflection on that occasion," said Lord Florimel. "All my feelings were in a state of bewildering excitement—all my senses were absorbed in the raptures which that woman, whoever she be, knows so well how to create and maintain in the soul. But is it possible you were a listener to all that discourse which must have made me seem in your eyes the most insensate, rash, and consummate madman in all Christendom?"

"I heard every syllable that was spoken," returned Caroline; "and I already entertained a presentiment that in the progress of the strange and romantic connexion which existed between yourself and the Unknown, something would transpire favourable to the one grand object of which

I never lost sight—namely, my revenge! Determined, therefore, to be enabled to convince the syren lady at any moment that I was acquainted with her secret, I took the opportunity to cut away a small piece from one of the curtains surrounding the bed, and another piece from the window drapery. Then, while you were sleeping and the lady had withdrawn, I effected my departure from the mansion. The rest of my narrative may be disposed of in a few words. You went to Dover—you wrote to London to order me to repair thither—and I soon ascertained that the Unknown was likewise a resident at the sea-port. Your meetings continued to take place under the same veil of mystery that had shrouded them in London. On an unfrequented part of the sea-beach you were wont to meet the tall domestic at night time: then your eyes were bandaged—and you were conducted to the house which the lady had taken in a secluded spot outside the town. In a short time you took me into your complete confidence—you revealed to me the fact that you intended to marry the Unknown—and you explained to me all the stipulations which she had made relative to the mystery that was to enshroud her name and likewise retain the veil over her countenance until *after* the nuptial knot was tied. Then did the idea strike me that the affair was at length taking a turn calculated to suit my own purposes; and I resolved to put my ingenuity to the rack, strain every nerve, and direct every artifice towards the accomplishment of my end. This was to become Lady Florimel instead of your syren charmer: and scarcely had I formed the idea, when I already pictured to myself the rage and despair, the fury and the affliction that would seize upon you when the cheat was discovered. The time came: you sent me on before you to London to settle all the requisite arrangements for your bridal—and I need not pause to remind you how nearly I succeeded in becoming indissolubly yours! Had it not been for the sudden entrance of the maniac wretch who subsequently died of hydrophobia—or had he even thus burst in upon us a few minutes later—all would have been over! But fate willed it otherwise—and doubtless the result, as it did occur, was for the best."

"But the Unknown, Caroline—the Unknown?" exclaimed Florimel. "How did you contrive to take her place?—what has become of her?—and who is she?"

"By the knowledge of her secret, and by displaying one of the pieces of drapery cut from the curtains in the boudoir," said Caroline, "I was enabled to coerce her at will. After the failure of my stratagem, and when I fled precipitately from Mrs. Brace's house, I wrote a letter to the Unknown enjoining her on no account to attempt a renewal of her connexion with you, if she valued her reputation and her honour: for that I would mercilessly expose her if she dared act in contravention to my commands."

"But wherefore did you adopt this course, Caroline?" inquired Florimel. "Surely it would have been a pleasurable spectacle to you, ere the change came over your vindictive frame of mind, to behold me rush headlong into the vortex of infatuation and folly by marrying that unknown lady?"

"No, Gabriel: I feared that if you married her, she would indeed be able to persuade George Woodfall to abandon the law-proceedings instituted against you: and *then*, previously to the recovery of the documents from Rigden, your case was hopeless in the extreme. I have now told you everything—I have explained all. Having for a season pursued you with unrelenting rancour—having seized upon every opportunity to strew your path with thorns and raise up difficulties around you—I am now brought, by the imminence of death, to that frame of mind which renders me truly contrite and penitent for the past. Though deep were the wrongs which I sustained at your hands, I ought to have tutored myself to pardon them—or at least to bear them resignedly, instead of seeking a detestable revenge."

"No, Caroline—now you are falling into extremes," cried Florimel. "I behaved most vilely to you—and you would have been deficient in a proper spirit had you not smarted under my conduct and sought the means of revenge. But your explanations are not quite complete: you have forgotten to name the Unknown——"

"I am growing faint, Gabriel—my strength is exhausted," murmured Caroline, in a low and tremulous voice; "a dimness comes over my eyes——"

"But the name, Caroline—the Unknown?" whispered Florimel, in as urgent a manner as feelings of propriety and delicacy would permit him to adopt under the circumstances.

"Bend down your head—nearer——closer, Gabriel," said the dying girl, in a still lower and fainter voice. "Let me imprint one last kiss upon your cheek——Pauline herself would not be displeased, were she here now ——there—'tis the kiss of complete reconciliation——"

"And you pardon me, Caroline?" said Florimel, tortured with suspense to have his other query answered.

"Yes—God knows how sincerely I pardon you," was the gentle and scarcely audible response: but the glazing eyes looked up with a last expiring fondness at the young nobleman.

"And the name——the name of the Unknown?" he said, in an agony of suspense.

"Ah! I had forgotten," were the words that wavered upon the lips of the dying girl: then, with a last effort, she breathed a name in the ear of Florimel, and fell back senseless upon her pillow.

At the same instant it happened that the surgeon, followed by the nurse, entered the chamber: and upon beholding the state in which Caroline was, the medical man hastened to adopt restorative means. These succeeded in bringing her back to life, but not to consciousness: and, in answer to a question whisperingly put by Florimel, the surgeon said that she might haply linger on a few hours—but that her existence could not possibly be prolonged to days.

Sad and sorrowing did Lord Florimel throw a farewell look upon the unfortunate young girl whom he had known so beautiful, but who now lay there like a lily which the rude hand of man had plucked from the stem of its pride and the garden of its purity, and thrown aside, crushed and sullied, when the sense was sated with its despoiled loveliness. A fearful pang shot through the heart of the young nobleman as he thus gazed upon that form which he had once clasped, glowing and impassioned, in

his arms, and which now lay slightly quivering and gently convulsing with the pain of returning animation beneath the influence of the restoratives. The thought—the bitter conviction—flashed to his mind that had he never seen her—had he never known her—she might yet be in the enjoyment of a vigorous health and an unalloyed happiness, as well perhaps as of a stainless purity: and then followed the damning, cutting, lacerating reflection that it was he,—yes, *he*—the seducer—who had originally done the deed which turned the whole current of her destiny, and gave the impulse to that career which, commencing with shame, passed through the phases of blighted affection, terrible accusation, yearning vengeance, dark intrigues, and a criminal gaol, to terminate in a violent death!

And not only was he stricken by remorse—but he was moved to his very soul's foundations by a melting tenderness, because she had pardoned him! Yes—the poor, wronged, injured girl, when stretched upon the bed of death, had laid aside her resentment for the sake of her former love—had renounced her feelings of bitterness in order to woo back the faded reminiscences of brighter times and happier hours: and under this holier influence she had blessed him—and she had promised to die with his name upon her lips! Yes—Oh! yes—deeply touching was the contemplation of all this to the mind of the young nobleman: and he felt that there was a voice whispering the bitterest, bitterest reproaches in the profundities of his soul—and he now understood what remorse was and what conscience meant!

"Doctor," he murmured in a trembling tone as he drew the surgeon aside for a moment, "you will devote every possible care to that poor girl—and, should she survive a few hours more," he added, the tears running down his cheeks and his voice almost choked with emotion, "I will return and see her to-morrow."

"My lord," replied the medical man, "every attention shall be devoted to her."

Florimel pressed the surgeon's hand in grateful acknowledgment of this pledge—fixed one long lingering look upon the pale countenance where the light of life still vacillated faintly—and then passed out of the infirmary with a step as slow and a mood as full of despairing sorrow as if he were leaving a funeral scene.

And Lord Florimel felt something *within* which gave him the assurance that he was an altered man!

CHAPTER CCXXIV.

THE MURDERESS.

It was night—deep midnight: the iron tongue of Time had just proclaimed it from St. Sepulchre's tower;—and when Mrs. Brace, in her solitary cell, had done counting twelve, the awful silence which followed seemed more profound, more dreadful, more solemn than it was before.

The wretched woman felt as if she were engulfed in a more than Egyptian darkness, and entombed in a more than sepulchral silence: a tremendous consternation was upon her as she sate in the Newgate cell. Horrible thoughts were passing slowly through her brain,—thoughts that peopled the intense gloom with ghastly objects and ever and anon evoked whispering voices from the depths of the very silence itself.

The night was so dark that not the feeblest glimmering could penetrate into her dungeon. She was therefore immured as it were in a pitchy blackness which could almost be felt;—and the massive walls of solid masonry beat back all sounds from without, rendering the interior of that cell as still as if it were a stone vault embedded a hundred feet below the surface of the earth. If there were orgies, or rioting, or weeping, or praying going on in other parts of the spacious establishment, not the faintest murmur thereof was borne to the ears of the wretched woman in her own cell: no noise, either of revelry or lamentation, could penetrate the immense wall which stood between herself and the companionship of the various felons'-wards;—naught could she hear, save the ominous loud-toned booming of St. Sepulchre's bell as it proclaimed the hours.

It was the middle of the night succeeding the day of so many and varied incidents,—that day, too, on which the milliner had wreaked her deadly vengeance upon Caroline Walters. Nearly twelve hours had now elapsed since the encounter in the passage; and the furious rage and vindictive wrath of the miserable woman had subsided into profound regrets and a terrible remorse. Thrice since the murderous deed was done had the turnkey visited her cell; and on each occasion had she demanded eagerly how it fared with Caroline Walters. The answers were but little assuring for the milliner: she learnt that the medical attendant had pronounced the wound mortal, and that it was impossible for Caroline to survive many days, even if she were to linger on beyond a few hours.

Mrs. Brace therefore knew that the blow which she had dealt, must sooner or later prove fatal;—and thus was she again and again a *murderess!* Oh! how appalling sounded that word even when breathed by the still small voice of conscience in the depths of the soul. The lips dared not breathe it: but the mind could not help *thinking* it—and the thought was purgatory itself! A murderess!—something from which human nature recoils with a cold shudder and with an icy trembling, as from the contemplation of a monstrous snake;—a being whose gaze even the strongest and most callous men are afraid to meet, and whose touch sends a thrill of horror to the very heart's core! A murderess!—something at which nature herself revolts, as if the deed made the very moon look red, the sun appear to set in blood, and the stars to grow dull and lurid as if their light had to penetrate through drops of gore!

The clock of St. Sepulchre's, we say, had just proclaimed the hour of midnight. Deep-toned and solemn was the bell as its oscillating metallic sound boomed through the heavy air, penetrating those huge walls of stone. The murderess counted each stroke—until she had numbered twelve: and then the excitement that reigned nervously throughout her form while the clock was striking, suddenly yielded to the awful consternation produced by returning silence. Her heart seemed to sink within her beneath the tremendous conviction that she was alone,—alone in the utter darkness—alone in the tomb-like stillness—alone with her harrowing thoughts!

But slowly—slowly did her imagination begin to people the dungeon with frightful shapes: ghastly forms, such as the disordered mind conjures up from the opening sepulchre and the yawning grave, began to rise in the midst of the pitchy darkness; and low murmurings, such as the troubled fancy conceives to be the voices of the dead, rustled as it were through the portentous silence of the place. Then, as the wretched woman sate in her dungeon-cell, with eyes wildly glaring and horribly dilating—with cheeks blanched as those of a corpse—with lips white and quivering—with upheaved bosom and suspended breath,—as thus she sate, we say, it appeared as if she actually and positively beheld real substantial shapes of ghostly horror, and heard whispering voices of unearthly sound.

Although a stupendous consternation held her motionless—paralyzed her tongue and made her limbs rigid—yet were her feelings as acute and her sensations as keen as if no one faculty were suspended and no single energy held in abeyance. Hell was raging in her soul—the tortures of the damned were racking her brain. The perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow: she was drenched from head to foot in her own agony. If every sinew, nerve, and fibre were laid bare and torn with pincers—if the scalp were removed and a searing iron applied to the brain thus exposed—if her eyes were torn from their sockets and molten lead or boiling oil dropped into the holes,—in fine, if all the tortures which man could invent or fiends inflict, were now applied to her, they could not have exceeded the agonizing sensations which she experienced as those ghastly shapes began to arise in the midst of the darkness and those voices came like the low rustling of withered leaves upon her ear!

The wretched woman could not restrain the play of her imagination, so hideous in its fantastic conceptions. She had utterly lost all control over her disordered mind, which thus ran wanton and wild in the realms of horror. She had no power to check the current of her thoughts and look all the objects of her terror in the face. To her, therefore, did they appear invested with a terrible reality and a ghastly substance. In a word, she laboured under the appalling belief that the spectres were no delusion and the voices no dream!

What, then, was the nature of her reflections now? Reflections, indeed! No: the ideas that traversed her brain were scarcely reflections—because she had no power to weigh them deliberately or ponder upon their significance. They were impressions of a positive nature,—impressions of a hideous character,—and from which she could not escape! Just heavens! were the graves of Newgate opening in the deep midnight, and sending up their dead to haunt, appal, and scare her?—were the tombs of murderers yawning in the midst of the prison-pavement and yielding up their ghastly tenants to proclaim her doom?—were the ghosts of the hanged rising from their coffins, their winding-sheets, and their cerements, to hail her with the hideous welcome of the dead? O God! with reeling brain, and bursting heart, and quivering limbs did the wretched woman picture to herself this catalogue of horrors;—and the paralysis which had held her motionless hitherto, now so far relaxed its rigid influence as to enable her to writhe and twist with the spasmodic convulsions of a stricken snake as she sate in her dungeon-cell. Then in the excruciation of her feelings—in the rending violence of her agony, her teeth bit through her lips till the blood spirted forth, and her nails dug into the palms of her hands till they were clotted with gore!

For the shapes that were stealing slowly, slowly through the darkness, and crept up as it were from a yawning gulf into her presence,—a gulf that was blacker than the blackness of her own dungeon,—those dreadful shapes gradually appeared to become more distinct, as they ranged themselves in a line along the solid wall. Then she saw—or fancied she saw—that they had all halters round their necks; and she knew—or at least harboured the harrowing conviction that they were the dead whose worldly histories were black with crime and whose earthly names were associated with the gallows! Tall, stark, gaunt corpses were they,—with their features all convulsed by the agonies of strangulation—their glazed eyes half starting from their heads and fixed upon the wretched woman in ghastly recognition—their mouths partly open—and their long, lank, withered, naked arms extended towards the spot where the milliner was seated! And then the atmosphere seemed to grow damp, and raw, and clammy as if infected with the breath of those spectral shapes: it was the mildewed atmosphere of the grave—the chill and musty exhalation of the tomb—the earthy and sickly vapour of the sepulchral vault!

Yes—with extended arms and fingers pointing towards the agonising, horror-stricken woman, stood the corpses of the hanged ones, with the halters round their necks. And the foremost addressed her in a voice that sounded like the hollow wind moaning through the wintry forest and mingling with the low murmurs of the withered boughs and rustling leaves. A chill more intense, more searching, more penetrating than aught she had yet experienced, struck to the very heart's core of the wretched Mrs. Brace,—a chill that crept throughout her form and along every limb, with the cold clammy feeling of a loathsome reptile.

"We rise from the grave to welcome thee amongst us," spoke the corpse: and its looks and its breath shot like ice-shafts through the brain and the heart of the milliner. "From those deep and silent solitudes where the worm pursues its noiseless sport, have we risen to give thee the greeting of the dead! Thine hours are told—thy minutes are numbered! and while hell is yawning to engulf thy spirit, the grave is opening to receive thy body. With the world of mortals thou hast little more to do: thou standest on the threshold of the sphere inhabited by the eternals. For thee the quenchless fire is already raging—for thee the undying worm is sharpening its sting. A little while—and that form will be rigid—those limbs will be stark—those features fixed in death; and the earth will rattle down upon thy coffin-lid—and the huge stone will be set over thy grave—and thou wilt be added to the number of the doomed that sleep beneath Newgate pavement!"

"And the worm shall prey upon thy flesh," spoke the second corpse, whose stony looks and chilling breath were sufficient to freeze all in a moment the hottest blood that ever circled in the human veins;—"and even in the very grave shalt thou

have a sensation and a feeling that will cause thee to experience all its dreadful gloom. Yes—and thou shalt feel too that thou art imprisoned in a narrow coffin: thou shalt know the stifling, suffocating oppressiveness of that narrow home. Thou shalt long to breathe—thou shalt yearn to throw off that sense of choking and strangulation which will feel like a tremendous stone upon your breast and like pieces of lead upon your mouth and nostrils: thou wilt concentrate all thine energies in the endeavour to put forth one long, deep respiration—and thou wilt not be able!"

"No—and thou wilt feel the worms creeping over thee," said the third corpse, taking up the terrific story: and its pale blue eyes looked cold as marble and its breath was laden with the ice-chill of Labrador, mingling with the mouldy rawness of the grave. "The worms shall creep over thee, I say—and thou wilt lie stiff and stark in thy coffin, powerless to throw them off. The relief that is to be found even in the recoil of a shudder will be denied thee. But there shalt thou lie, while the worms will fasten upon thine eyes—force their way through the balls—and eat holes down into the depths of the sockets. And thou shalt experience all the hideous sensations attendant upon their slow and slimy movements, as they creep in and creep out;—and thou shalt long to vent thine agony and thine horror in a scream—but the seal of Death's silence will be upon thy lips!"

"Save at midnight," spoke the fourth corpse, whose stony gaze and chilling breath were as dreadful as his companions': "when thou shalt recover the power of motion and of speech, that thou may'st rise from thy grave and give to others that welcome which we are come to bestow upon thee. Yes—thou shalt form one of the tribe of troubled spirits and spectral shapes that enhance the horror of a Newgate midnight: thy grave shall open and thou shalt come forth from thy coffin and from thine earthy solitude, to render the hours of darkness hideous and appalling! To thee shall this dread privilege be accorded as well as to us;—and when thou art no more a denizen of the world of the living, thou wilt revisit this very cell in thy shroud and thy spectral terrors, to affright each doomed inmate in thy turn even as we are here to affright thee now!"

Then the band of unearthly shapes all extended their hands and pointed their fingers simultaneously towards the milliner; and their ghastly hollow eyes, leaden and dull with the stony stillness of death, were fixed upon her in a way that made her flesh creep upon her bones. And slowly, slowly—gradually, gradually, they advance towards her,—while she, quivering at her very centre and with a feeling as if a block of ice lay upon her heart, had no power to rise from her seat nor to recoil a hair's breadth from the appalling presence. She shrank as it were within herself—her very soul seemed sinking into a tremendous chasm;—while the dreadful shapes drew nearer and nearer, with their extended arms and their steady corpse-like stare,—until at length they placed their cold hands upon the shoulders of the miserable women. Then, as she felt the sanguine current of life stagnating beneath the touch of those hands so marble cold, a hollow moan escaped her lips;—and this breaking of a long and stupendous silence on her part, appeared to be the signal for a new phase in the wild and horrible drama. For now the fearful shapes suddenly seemed to become animated with a lurid fire that first spread over them as it were with a bronzing effect, and then increased in power so as to give them the appearance of transparency,—until the glow heightened to an intenseness which produced an effect as if the spectral forms were moving in the midst of a tremendous furnace. Thus, as horror succeeded upon horror, the brain of the milliner was shattered with the recurring paroxysms—her very soul was riven by the wildest tortures—and a cry, between a shriek and a yell, thrilled from her ashy lips.

The spell of her waking dream was dissolved in a moment: the ghastly phantasmagorian train vanished quickly as the eye can wink;—and once again was the milliner entombed in the darkness of utter night and in the silence of the grave!

For nearly a minute did she sit motionless while her ideas re-settled themselves in her brain: the stagnation of the blood gave way—the sanguine tide flowed languidly for a few moments, and then faster;—but the tide was turned—and the muscles also regained full play. She started up—she swept her open palms athwart her forehead upon which the perspiration stood in large drops;—and then, with a sudden half-pace forward, she extended her arms wildly, murmuring in a hurried, hoarse tone and with broken accents, "'Twas a delusion—a mere delusion—but how horrible!"

And then she sank back upon the seat whence she had risen; and her arms fell languid and dead by her sides—and once more was she struck by the stupor of a tremendous consternation and an ineffable dismay. Her very soul was crushed as with the weight of all the human woes that had gathered and concentrated for centuries and centuries:—and thus for a few minutes did she remain in the utter absorption and annihilation of blank despair. But all in a moment a pang shot through her heart and a feeling of horror traversed her brain:—and as a host of vivid memories swept over her spirit, conjuring up all her former enjoyments and contrasting them with her present agonies, the thought of her position goaded her almost to madness.

"Wretch, wretch that I am!" she murmured to herself, in sharp and impatient accents, as she beat the bosom that palpitated with voluptuous feelings no more: "what a fearful turn have I given to the current of my existence! The other day I was rich, happy, and cradled in luxury: now I am the inmate of a dungeon-cell. Though full of health and vigour, the hand of death lies cold upon my shoulder! My God! my God! what have I done? into what an abyss of horrors have I plunged myself! Oh! is there no retreat?—is there no retracing the path of life for a few weeks—only a few weeks? Is it possible that I am in Newgate—that I shall be tried—that I shall hang to the gibbet? Or am I under the influence of a horrible dream—a fearful nightmare? Let me see," she continued more slowly: and as she sate in the depth of the impenetrable darkness of her dungeon, she placed her elbows upon her knees and rested her face upon her hands as she endeavoured to make her mental vision penetrate through the cloudiness and perplexity of her brain. "Let me see," she repeated, in a tone of measured precision, as if she sought to establish her points one by one:

"I am assuredly the person I believe myself to be —Mrs. Brace—the fashionable milliner. I have been lovely in my youth and handsome in my maturer years: I have been the mistress of the Prince—I have been courted by all the highest, and richest, and noblest of the aristocracy. And yet as I now look back upon my life, it appears to have been only a dream,—one long, continuous dream of pleasure and voluptuousness,—and not a reality. Yet there are circumstances in my career on which my retrospection looks with a sensation of pleasure. Yes—those hours of burning joys which I passed with the Prince when first I knew him; — aye, and those nights of bliss which I have spent in the arms of Eugene Montgomery! Ah! now another fact arises to my mind. I recollect that night—that night of alarm and menace—on which a man entered my chamber when Eugene was my companion. And that man—he was my husband!—and Eugene heard all that passed between him and me—and he sprang from the bed—and they wrestled a moment—and then Eugene conducted my husband down stairs and made him quit the house. Ah! how well do I remember all the details of that scene! But why do I now dwell upon it? Because it was the last time that Eugene Montgomery visited me: no doubt he was disgusted at the discovery that the ruffian was my husband! Since then all seemed to go ill with me: misfortunes accumulated rapidly —and I was enmeshed in the inextricable web of crime ere I had even a moment to pause and reflect upon what course I should pursue. Crime!—yes, crime!—crime the most horrible, the most deadly, the most unpardonable!" exclaimed the wretched woman with thrilling accents of terror, anguish, and despair. "Crime!—aye, crime that will send me to the scaffold! Oh! that dreadful word—that shocking idea! Can it be that I am in my sound senses —that I have done all those things—and that I must hang, hang, hang upon the accursed gibbet?"

And the miserable woman's voice rang piercingly through the cell, making the very air vocal with human agony.

"The gibbet!" she repeated, after a few moments' pause—and her dress rustled as her entire frame shook from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet: "the gibbet! Who breathed that frightful word in my ears? Hah! I remember! Yes—they were here ere now—those ghastly things that welcomed me amongst them! Holy God! am I then already looked upon as one dead? Is my coffin made—is my shroud sewn—is my grave dug? Yes—yes—*they* said it was so! But never, never will I perish on the scaffold!" she suddenly exclaimed with a wilder excitement as she sprang to her feet. "What! to have the cord fastened round my neck by the rude hands of the executioner—to go forth upon the scaffold—to be gazed upon by thousands and thousands—and then to drop, to hang, and swing—— Oh! no—no!"

And the wretched woman clasped her hands together with all the violence of an excruciating anguish.

But her excitement increased: it rose to a delirium —a frenzy of terrors. She tore her hair—she beat her bosom—she dashed her open palms violently against her brows as she gave vent to ejaculations of mingled despair and woe. Her grief was wild—her lamentations piteous. Through the dense darkness of the dungeon the scaffold loomed to her imagination. She saw it all,—yes, all the dread paraphernalia and procession of death,—the chaplain, the sheriffs, the executioner—and her own self, with the halter round her neck!

Frantic with mingled terror and dismay, despair and horror, the wretched woman rushed across her cell to escape from the spectacle which her imagination had conjured up. But she stumbled over a stool and hurt herself severely. The pain maddened her all the more goadingly: a lava-stream was circulating in her veins—sparks flashed before her eyes—her brain was seething. Existence was now a perfect hell—life was an excruciation. No—not life itself: because she would have given her soul to save herself from a premature death—she would have surrendered all her hopes of an hereafter to prolong the present. It was not exactly life, then, that had become intolerable;—but it was the prospect of ending this life on the scaffold, that was infusing a horrible madness into her veins, and torturing her whole being into an agonizing frenzy.

What could she do?—was there no hope? To this latter query did every conviction of her mind, and every circumstance of her position give back a stern, uncompromising negative. *There was no hope!* Her doom was fixed: her death was certain. Then to anticipate the penalty which human justice was sure to inflict! Ah! *that* now became the dominant idea in her brain;—and the maddened woman resolved upon self-destruction!

There was such a fearful hurry in her brain—such a wild excitement in her manner, that she did not pause to reflect upon the resolve to which her agonising, burning, torturing, scorching, searing sensations hurried her. A demon appeared to have taken possession of her mind—a fiend was ruling her senses. With desperate hand she unfastened her apparel—drew forth the stay-lace—and tore away as many tapes and strings as the female vesture can ordinarily supply: then, refastening her dress as well as she was able, she sate down upon her iron-framed pallet to twist all those tapes and strings into one strong cord. The whole of this proceeding was the work of a very few moments; and though the hands of the wretched woman trembled as nervously as her entire frame quivered,—though her pulses were beating with a rapidity beyond all counting, and her veins were running with a lava-stream that was as furious as it was burning,—though madness was raging in her brain and the demon of despair was tugging at her heart-strings,—nevertheless, she achieved her dread preparations with a marvellous rapidity.

The rope was woven,—woven by her subtle fingers in the midst of the dense impenetrable darkness: and then she bethought herself of the bars that defended the window of the dungeon—and likewise of the stool against which she had stumbled a few minutes back! All the means of death were thus at her disposal—within her reach—fearfully available;—and she hesitated not—no, not even for an instant! On the contrary, her proceedings were as quick and her movements as rapid as if there were no darkness to impede her: it appeared to her as if she could *see* her way easily, as she *felt* it through the pitchy blackness in which she was entombed. But then her mind had a horrible clearness with regard to all the details of that suicidal process: for she was resolved to

cheat the hangman—the gallows—and the multitudes that throng to the spectacle of death, as the carrion crows gather around a corpse!

Great, then, was the precision with which the determined, desperate woman tied a running knot in the cord which she had woven;—and it was even with a feeling of triumph—dreadful, savage, ferocious triumph—that she flung the noose over her head. Then mounting upon the stool, she fastened the other end to the bars of the window: and now——

——And now, all her suicidal preparations being complete, and the impenetrable, immeasurable abysm of eternity already opening before her mental vision, she stopped short—for a sudden consternation overwhelmed her! Still standing upon the stool, with the cord of twisted tapes round her neck, the miserable woman was struck with dismay as she now looked death face to face. Hell seemed to be opening at her feet: beyond the more than Egyptian darkness which prevailed in her dungeon, the lurid fires of Satan's kingdom appeared to burn!

But at the moment when, thus stricken with dismay and overpowered by dread horror, the murderess was experiencing a revulsion of feeling which would inevitably have ended in the abandonment of her suicidal project,—at the moment, we say, when her thoughts reached that turning-point and her ideas arrived at that juncture at which she was on the point of flinging off the noose and leaping down from the stool,—at this moment was it that the clock of Saint Sepulchre's proclaimed the hour of one!

Suddenly broke that iron sound upon the deep silence of the dungeon-cell: suddenly rolled the metallic din upon the ear of the murderess. And with such startling, fearful, thrilling effect did it thus break through the utter stillness of the place, that the milliner was shaken with a strong convulsive spasm which made her totter upon the stool. With a desperate effort she strove to recover her balance: the struggle was as brief as the passage of a single idea through the brain—but it was the last frenzied effort of one who stood on the black brink of eternity! A sound between a shriek and a cry burst from her lips as she felt that the stool was upsetting beneath her—and down she fell!

But her fall was instantaneously broken by the abrupt jerk of the tightened cord: there was a sudden sensation as if all the blood in her body had gushed up, hot and boiling, into her bursting brain—and myriads of bright sparks flashed before her eyes. Desperately she threw up her arms and applied her fingers to the noose that was strangling her: but the cord was woven strongly and her weight was heavy—and thus she could neither break nor loosen it. Maddened by her dying agonies and by the rending thoughts that swept with the keen sharpness of razors through her brain, she tried to regain the stool with her feet—but it had upset and was *below* her reach: and then she strove, with the last energy of desperation, to raise herself up against the uneven rugged mason-work. But her attempts were unavailing—a sense of weakness came upon her with giant strides—and she swung and dangled, in her hideous convulsions, against the wall up which she could not climb. Her struggles—her death-agonies and writhings—had now lasted nearly a minute and were horrible beyond all delineation—frightful beyond any human power of description: but their acme was reached—their height was passed—and as their intensity subsided with a proportionate rapidity, their excruciating torments yielded to a numbness which speedily passed into death itself!

When the morning dawned and the turnkey visited the cell, Mrs. Brace was discovered hanging to the bars of the window. She was instantaneously cut down—and the surgeon was sent for: but he found the corpse quite cold and declared that the wretched murderess must have been dead some hours.

CHAPTER CCXXV.

THE EARL OF MONTGOMERY'S VISITORS.

THE day that dawned upon the deed of self-destruction which we have just narrated, was the 31st of May,—a day that was destined to prove memorable in respect to the conflicts between the Montgomerys and Lady Bellenden. Indeed, this was the day on which the Master in Chancery had undertaken to deliver his Report upon the various points at issue; and as the eventual judgment of the Lord Chancellor himself was certain to be influenced, if not altogether guided by the nature of that Report, it was feasibly assumed that the long pending process between the Montgomerys and the Bellendens would be virtually settled on this day.

The Earl of Montgomery rose from his couch at an early hour;—and gazing upon his image in the looking-glass, he murmured to himself, "I am pale—but not so pale nor ill as might be expected after the sleepless hours which I passed, and after the troubled dreams that haunted me during the brief slumber that visited me at length!"

The nobleman then proceeded with his toilette: but in the midst he stopped short—pressed his hand to his brow—and said impatiently to himself, "How is it that I cannot divest my soul of this gloomy presentiment? It is the influence of those unpleasant visions still overshadowing my imagination. Wherefore should my heart sink within me? why should my hand tremble thus? and how is it that I experience this feverish heat all over me? I have nothing to fear—nothing to apprehend. *My* secrets are all safe—Fernanda is staunch—and Rigden declares that I must gain the suit. Why, then, do I yield to apprehension? why am I a prey to terrors so indefinite and vague? Oh! it is that *one* fearful incident which has never ceased to haunt me since the date of its occurrence—an incident so full of mystery that I am as much at a loss to comprehend it now as I was on the morning after it took place! Fatal, accursed longing that impelled me to accept that domino and proceed to the masquerade! Madman, idiot, dolt, and dotard that I was to suffer myself to be so completely enmeshed in the fascinations of that syren, whoever she might be! And who *could* she have been? who *was* she?" exclaimed the Earl aloud, his tone and manner both indicating the excitement and petulance of a most painful, torturing perplexity. "The only being really and positively interested in playing such a part in order to worm out of me all my most precious secrets, is Laura Bellenden herself; and *she* could not have been the wanton who found a Montgomery in her embraces when she expected to receive a Florimel!"

The Earl's musings were interrupted by the entrance of Gilbert, his confidential valet, who was somewhat surprised to find that his noble master had risen so early.

"It is scarcely seven o'clock, my lord," observed the dependant.

"I am aware of it, Gilbert," replied the nobleman: "but I could sleep no longer—and my bed became irksome. Wherefore have you sought my chamber so early—a full hour before the usual time?"

"An old man requests an immediate audience, my lord," returned the valet; "and I therefore came to see whether your lordship was awake. He says that his business is important——"

"His name?" demanded the Earl, impatiently.

"Chapman, my lord," was the response.

"Ah! Chapman from the village of Bellenden!" exclaimed Montgomery, his heart sinking within him: for he could not possibly augur anything favourable from the visit of the old stonemason. "Tell him that I will be with him in a few minutes."

And while Gilbert was absent from the room delivering this message, the Earl performed the remainder of his toilette with feverish impatience: for, the longer he reflected upon the singularity of Chapman's visit, the greater became his apprehension that it could have originated in nothing favourable to his own interests. Having at length dressed himself, he hurried down stairs to the parlour where Chapman was waiting for him.

"What tidings, my good friend?" demanded the Earl, as he closed the doors of the apartment behind him.

"Something which your lordship ought to know," returned the old man, who had a forbidding countenance and a sinister expression of the eyes.

"Good or bad? Speak!" ejaculated Eugene, impatiently.

"Good, I should say," was the rejoinder.

"Then we may now converse at our ease, Chapman," said the Earl, flinging himself upon a sofa with the air of a man who has just had a considerable weight taken off his mind. "I felt assured that it must have been business of no ordinary importance that could have brought you up to London and made you come to me thus early in the morning; and I was fearful that something might have transpired relative to the vault——"

"There's nothing to apprehend on that score," interrupted Chapman. "Nobody in Bellenden village has learnt as yet, or ever will learn, that your lordship had most particular and private reasons for ordering your agents to employ me to open the Bellenden vault when they went down to the village three months ago. Of course Northwitch the sexton was very savage at the preference: but he could make nothing more of it *than* a mere preference."

"Good. And now about your visit to London?" said the Earl, inquiringly.

"Your lordship told me I was always to let you know anything that transpired," observed Chapman; "and therefore I thought I would lose no time in coming up. I left Bellenden the evening before last—took a chaise-cart over to Birmingham—and then got a place outside the heavy stage which landed me in London an hour ago ——"

"After two nights on the road—eh?" remarked the Earl. "Well—and you hurried away to me at once the moment you dismounted at the coach-office?"

"Just so, my lord," was the reply.

"And the object of your visit?" exclaimed the Earl, interrogatively.

"Lady Bellenden has been down at the village, my lord ——"

"Ah! But for what purpose?"

"To examine the vaults and the registers ——"

"The registers!" ejaculated Montgomery, with a start: then instantly muttering to himself, "But Chapman knows nothing about the register," he collected all his presence of mind and made a motion for the old man to continue his explanations.

"Her ladyship arrived at Bellenden the day before yesterday, in the early part of the afternoon," proceeded Chapman; "and soon after her arrival, her footman Richard took a post-chaise and went off somewhere else—but I don't know where. Then her ladyship proceeded to the church along with Parson Roberts, while Mrs. Margaret came and called upon me. I saw that she was up to something: for she was so tremendously polite—and I pretended to be very friendly and communicative the better to draw her out. At length, after beating about the bush a good deal, she began to touch upon your lordship's visit to Bellenden upwards of three months ago: then she talked of your lordship's agents coming down here immediately afterwards and employing me to open the vaults;—and then she began to pump me as to why your lordship showed a friendly disposition toward me—until she at length said plainly and openly that her mistress was the lady to bestow handsome rewards upon those who espoused her cause and furthered her interest. So then I let Mrs. Margaret see pretty clearly that if she meant bribery and corruption, I was not the man to be bribed and corrupted—and away she went quite in a tantrum."

"What on earth could she mean? what object could she have?" exclaimed Montgomery. "Unless she suspected that there was some little trivial incident on which you could throw some light, I am at a loss to comprehend her proceeding."

"Or perhaps she fancied that I know much more than I really do," observed Chapman.

"Possibly so," said the Earl, in a musing tone.

"For, after all, what could I have told her even if I had been inclined to talk freely?" continued Chapman: "merely that your lordship came to me about three months ago and told me that in a few days from that time your agents would be down at the village to inspect the Bellenden vault, the job of opening which should be given to me; but that I must not show any surprise on finding the mortar of the stone quite soft and other evidences that the vault had very recently been opened. Well, I promised to obey your lordship's instructions—and sure enough I *did* find that the stone had been lifted very lately: but I took care to hold my peace—and not even your lordship's agents suspected the fact. As a matter of course I can very well guess that your lordship, or at all events some persons employed by your lordship, had visited the vault with the utmost secrecy a few days before it was opened and examined in the official manner when my services were required: but whatever reasons your lordship may have had, or what you may have wanted to do in the vault, is no business

of mine—especially as your lordship paid me liberally to hold my tongue;—and therefore not a living soul, *in* Bellenden or *out of* Bellenden, is a whit the wiser for anything I may know."

While the stonemason was thus indulging in the garrulity which was characteristic of his old age, and which was also inspired by a feeling of pride at being in any way enlisted in the confidence of the Earl of Montgomery, no matter how slightly and partially,—while he was thus chattering, we say, the nobleman remained plunged in profound meditation: for the visit of Lady Bellenden to the village which bore her name, and the evident attempt of Mrs. Margaret to tamper with old Chapman, were calculated to trouble and perplex him.

"You say that the Marchioness proceeded to the vaults?" he at length observed in an interrogative manner when the stonemason had ceased speaking.

"She went there with Parson Roberts and Northwitch, my lord," replied Chapman: "but I don't know what took place, beyond the fact that the corpse of the late Marquis, her ladyship's husband, was seen half hanging out of its coffin——Ah! I noticed it when I opened the vault for your lordship's agents three months ago," observed Chapman, interrupting himself in the course of his explanations: "but I didn't know at the time that it was the late Marquis——"

"Nor did I suspect that such was the case," thought Montgomery within himself, "on that memorable night when the coffin exploded with a din that terrified the two men——But proceed with your narrative, Chapman," suddenly exclaimed Eugene aloud, thus cutting short the current of his own retrospective musings. "You were telling me that when the Marchioness, accompanied by Mr. Roberts, and attended by Northwitch, visited the vault the day before yesterday, they saw a corpse hanging half way out of its coffin——"

"Yes, my lord," said Chapman; "and it appears

that before they ascertained whose body it was, some observations were made which confused and irritated her ladyship most strangely. Northwitch's assistant told me about it within an hour after the visit of the Marchioness to the church: and it was on hearing of this matter that I resolved to come up to London and see your lordship."

"Well, my good friend," exclaimed Montgomery, inwardly cursing the garrulous circumlocution of his rustic partizan,—"and what was it that thus agitated and annoyed the Marchioness?"

"Because the corpse of her late husband, my lord," responded Chapman, "was so blue and swollen, and presented such an extraordinary appearance, that Northwitch declared the deceased must have been poisoned——"

"Poisoned!" ejaculated Montgomery. "Ah! a light breaks in upon me——But go on—go on, my good friend!"

"Well, my lord," continued the stonemason, "it seems that her ladyship was sadly put out; and she read Northwitch a long lecture on the subject. Altogether, Northwitch's assistant assured me that the incident had excited the strangest suspicions in his breast—the more so that Northwitch also observed, quoting me as the authority and calling me a scandalous fellow for my pains, that her ladyship was reported to have detested the Marquis when she was forced into a marriage with him, and to have even loved another——Besides," exclaimed the old man, interrupting himself all in a moment as another idea flashed to his recollection,—"did not the Marquis of Bellenden die very suddenly and suspiciously?"

"That was precisely the thought which struck me just now and which broke upon me like an inspiration," said Earl Montgomery. "But go on, Chapman: what more have you to tell?"

"Nothing particular, my lord," was the answer. "I thought you would like to hear that there is some reason to suppose the Marchioness poisoned her husband," he added, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; "and it was in reference to those tidings that I assured your lordship at the beginning that my errand was not of an unfavourable nature."

"I am obliged to you Chapman—much obliged to you—for the interest which you have taken in my affairs," said the Earl, rising from his seat and pacing the apartment in a reflective mood. "What, after all, if my cousin Laura should prove to be a consummate hypocrite? If she were really guilty of the crime of murder—if she were capable of poisoning—she could also play the wanton and the harlot, and conceal her debaucheries beneath that eternal garb of widowhood! Heavens! if it were indeed she on whose panting, heaving bosom I lay pillowed in the boudoir of darkness and mystery, when in a moment of rapturous idolatry and sensuous intoxication I revealed to the ears of the enchantress those tremendous secrets——"

The Earl's musings were interrupted at this point by the entrance of a domestic, who came to announce that Mr. Rigden's head-clerk requested an interview with his lordship.

"Where is he?" demanded the nobleman, the quiver of suspense and excitement shooting through his frame—for he knew that the individual in question had been despatched into Warwickshire to make inquiries concerning his brother Raymond.

"I have shown him into your lordship's private sitting-room," responded the domestic.

"I will join him there," said Montgomery. "Take this worthy man with you to the servants' hall," continued the Earl, indicating Chapman by a look, "and see that he is well and bounteously treated."

Having issued these instructions, the nobleman hastened to the sitting-room where Mr. Rigden's head-clerk was waiting his presence. By the travel-soiled appearance and untidy toilette of the individual, it was easy to perceive that he had just come from a long journey and that he had passed the night in a vehicle; and the Earl trembled from head to foot as he thought within himself. "It must be a matter of no ordinary importance that could have induced this man to come straight hither the moment he set foot in London again!"

But the Earl had time to master his feelings and compose his looks while the head-clerk, who was naturally of a servile and cringing disposition, made him a low obeisance.

"You have just returned from Warwickshire, I presume?" said Montgomery, adopting a tone of curiosity, and subduing the feeling of painful suspense which was really dominant in his breast. "Have you succeeded in obtaining an interview with my brother? and has he complied with the conditions of that clause in our ancestor's will——"

"My lord," interrupted the clerk, assuming a tone and demeanour suited to the tidings which he was about to impart, but which he was not altogether sure would prove totally *new* to the Earl,—for the man of business had imbibed certain suspicions not very favourable to the nobleman;—"my lord," he said, with demure look and solemn voice, "you must prepare yourself to hear the most distressing intelligence concerning your poor brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery."

"Good heavens! what mean you?" exclaimed Eugene, apparently labouring under the most torturing suspense.

"I mean, my lord," was the answer, "that your brother Raymond is no more!"—and the clerk, who had hitherto spoken with looks mournfully bent downward, now raised his eyes suddenly and fixed them upon the Earl with so peculiar an expression as to strike the guilty noble that Rigden's factotum was endeavouring to read the effect which his communication would have upon him.

"No more!—my brother Raymond no more!" cried the Earl: then covering his face with his hands and turning aside, he burst into a painful ebullition of woe—or at least appeared to do so.

"I am wrong," thought the clerk within himself; "and I have done the Earl an injustice. He is deeply affected at his brother's loss—and it was most uncharitable in me to suspect him of so foul a deed!"

And having arrived at this conclusion, the clerk, who took snuff after the example of his employer Mr. Rigden, regaled himself with a copious pinch of the pulverized weed: but he took it with a careful noiselessness, the grief of Lord Montgomery now appearing to be too violent for the slightest interruption.

"But tell me, my good friend—tell me," exclaimed the Earl, suddenly turning towards the

clerk and speaking in broken accents the profound grief of which corresponded with his looks,—"tell me when and under what circumstances my poor brother died!"

"My lord," resumed the clerk, his tone and demeanour increasing in solemnity, now that his suspicions relative to the Earl were allayed and that he could respect the nobleman's grief,—"my lord, your brother has been most foully and mysteriously dealt with: in plain terms, his death has been a violent one—and murder has done its frightful work!"

"Murder!" echoed Lord Montgomery, his countenance becoming livid and ghastly. "No—no! you cannot mean that my poor Raymond has been murdered!"

"It is, alas! too true, my lord," answered the clerk. "Yesterday morning, between seven and eight o'clock, and in the company of the Marchioness of Bellenden, who was present at the mournful scene, I beheld the remains of Lord Raymond dragged forth from the buttress of Malden bridge."

"You are talking strangely—most strangely," exclaimed the Earl; "or else my brain is confused and bewildered by grief. The Marchioness of Bellenden present at the time—my brother's remains—the buttress of a bridge——"

"Oh! my lord, it is indeed too true," cried the clerk; "and the terrible spectacle will haunt me for the remainder of my life. I am sorry that accident led me to the spot at the moment when the young lord's body was discovered beneath the stone!"

"But the Marchioness of Bellenden?" exclaimed the Earl, whose fearful excitement and alarm were taken by the clerk for a genuine affliction and horror at his brother's appalling fate: "how came *she* there at such a time and on such an occasion?"

"To fulfil some ceremony with regard to the bridge," responded the clerk; "and as it was deemed requisite that her ladyship should deposit certain coins in the hollow of the buttress, the crowning stone was raised for that purpose. The dreadful discovery was then made that there was a corpse beneath—and this corpse proved to be the remains of your lordship's brother!"

"Good heavens! what will my poor mother feel?" cried Eugene, clasping his hands with all the apparent agony of despair. "It will be the death of her! But the Marchioness of Bellenden ——how took she the dread spectacle?"

"Her ladyship was as much shocked and affected as any one present," replied the clerk, "although every one bearing the name of Montgomery must be considered her enemy. But the Marchioness of Bellenden is a true Christian and a most excellent lady—you can read her character in her countenance——"

"And she was both shocked and affected?" exclaimed the Earl interrogatively.

"Very much so, my lord," was the answer. "Indeed, it was a scene——"

"I can well understand how distressing it must have been! Oh! my poor brother! my poor brother!" he cried, in a tone of bitter lamentation. "But is there no way of accounting for his death? does suspicion fall upon no one? Or what is the impression that the awful tragedy has left upon the minds of those who witnessed it?"

"No one seemed able to form a conjecture, my lord," answered the man of business. "But I came away so hurriedly that I had no time to glean any particular opinions——"Ah! stay, though," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "I recollect that something was said about a private carriage being seen in the vicinity of the bridge, on the morning that the huge stone fell down—or was let down——For your lordship must know that the crowning stone had not been purposely lowered by the masons——"

At this moment a domestic entered the room, to inform his master that Lord Florimel requested an interview with him.

"Lord Florimel at this early hour!" exclaimed Montgomery, glancing at a time-piece which showed him that it was only eight o'clock. "I have just received intelligence of so distressing a nature, that I cannot see any one save upon business of urgency and importance."

"His lordship desires me to say," remarked the domestic, "that his business is of a pressing nature, but that he shall not detain your lordship many minutes."

"Then I will see him," observed Lord Montgomery;—and he repaired to the apartment to which Florimel had been shown.

The young nobleman was pale and care-worn: a profound melancholy sate upon his features so femininely handsome;—and, mingled with that mournful aspect, there was a certain sedateness which showed that the mind was influenced by no merely temporary impression, but that it had undergone a great and signal change. Tossed upon the waves of doubt, suspense, and anxiety as Earl Montgomery was, and having all his thoughts absorbed in the grave and momentous position of his own affairs, he nevertheless was struck by the altered appearance of his friend;—and hastening to take him by the hand, he exclaimed, "My dear Florimel, what is the matter with you?—has anything unpleasant occurred that you visit me so early?"

"Give me your patience for a few minutes, Eugene," said the young nobleman, "and I will explain myself. You remember my page Rao—— But of course you do, for more reasons than one. Well, that sable youth was none other than Caroline Walters—the young girl whom you saw at Mrs. Brace's——"

"And whom you seduced, Gabriel," observed Montgomery. "But is this possible? Rao and Caroline Walters, the murderess, identical——"

"She is innocent, Eugene, of the crime imputed to her," interrupted Florimel; "and a strange tale will no doubt transpire shortly, when the trial of Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, comes on. For it appears that the cases are to some extent connected. But of that no matter. Caroline Walters, mortally wounded by Mrs. Brace——"

"What! Mrs. Brace perpetrated another crime!" exclaimed Montgomery. "Wretched woman that she is!—and to think how intimate she and I once were together!"

"Her mortal career is closed, Eugene," said Lord Florimel, in a solemn tone. "During the past night she committed suicide by hanging herself in her cell——"

"Better to die thus than perish upon the scaffold!" exclaimed Montgomery, with a singular emphasis. "Oh! the gallows must be dreadful—dreadful!"—and he shuddered as if he himself had some apprehension of the possibility of being overtaken by such

a doom. "But when did you hear of Fanny Brace's death?" he inquired, almost immediately.

"Late last evening I was sent for to Newgate to receive the dying confession and the sincere pardon of Caroline Walters," answered Florimel, who did not observe the sinister nature of his friend's emotions: "and I promised the medical man that I would return this morning and see whether she still lingered on. Having passed a sleepless night, I rose very early and have already paid my promised visit to the gaol. Caroline Walters still lives, and indeed retains her full consciousness: but there is no hope of her ultimate recovery. As I was coming away the rumour was spreading through the prison that Mrs. Brace had just been discovered hanging in her cell; and on making the inquiry, I found that such was indeed the case."

"And thus terminates the career of the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall!" said Lord Montgomery, rather in a musing than a mocking tone. "The mistress of a prince—a courtezan in whose arms have reposed some of England's proudest peers—a procuress and a go-between——"

"Wherefore enumerate her failings now that she is no more, Eugene?" interrupted Florimel, in a reproachful tone. "Let us remember that if it were not for such voluptuaries as you and I have been, there would be no scope for the avocations of a Mrs. Brace. But let that pass. My object in paying you this early visit is dictated by those feelings of sincere friendship which have mutually animated us from our boyhood. In a word, I have resolved upon communicating to you a secret which poor Caroline Walters revealed to me last night——"

"A secret which regards me?" exclaimed Montgomery, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"I am not sure—perhaps it may," said Florimel: "at all events I shall be pursuing the safer course by breathing this revelation in your ear. Eugene," continued the young nobleman, after a few moments' pause, "I am acquainted with all the particulars concerning that masquerade at Covent Garden ——"

"Ah! then the secret regards the Unknown?" ejaculated Montgomery, his whole frame trembling with the poignancy of a suspense suddenly excited to the most painful degree. "But you will forgive me for having undertaken to play your part upon that occasion?"

"You were imprudent—most imprudent, Eugene," returned Florimel: "and you know not all the mischief that has resulted from your freak. But the friendship of years is not to be destroyed by such a thoughtless, foolish act on your part; and therefore we will not talk of forgiveness in the matter. The important point is whether you know who the syren-lady is ——"

"I do not," cried Montgomery, his impatience amounting to a positive excruciation. "But I would give worlds to learn that secret; and if you be acquainted with it, Gabriel ——"

"Softly—one moment," said the young nobleman. "Is it possible that intoxicated by her wiles and infatuated by her seductiveness, you made any communications which ought not to have been revealed to an enemy ——"

"Ah! an enemy!" repeated Montgomery, with a terrible sinking at the heart. "Do you mean me to understand, Gabriel, that the Unknown is ——"

And he whispered a name in Florimel's ear.

"It is she!" replied the young nobleman. "But as a point of honour you will retain this secret—— Good heavens! what ails you?" exclaimed Florimel, as he beheld his friend sink down, ghastly pale and trembling all over, upon an ottoman.

"Nothing — nothing," said Montgomery, the words seeming to come gaspingly from the agitated recesses of his heart: "a sudden indisposition——"

"No, my dear friend," interrupted Florimel, energetically; "it was no sudden indisposition. But it was a fright—a shock——Ah! if you in any way placed yourself in that woman's power, you will bitterly, bitterly rue your folly—your madness: for assuredly nothing short of utter madness could it have been!"

"It was, Gabriel—it was," said the Earl, in a stifling tone. "But I know something relative to herself — a crime which places her in my power——"

"Beware how you war against that woman!" exclaimed Florimel, with a voice and manner of solemn warming. "I have reason to know that she is a consummate adept in intrigue—a veritable diplomatist in all the worst arts of duplicity, deceit, and guile. Full nearly did she enmesh me irrecoverably in her snares; and now that I look back upon the past, I shudder when I think of the narrow escape that I have experienced. She is a snake that fascinates its victim—a serpent gifted with a dreadful power of charming and enrapturing those around whom she intends to wind her coils! O Eugene! if I told you all——but I cannot now —I have not either the heart or the leisure——"

"Would to God I had some proof that she is indeed the syren that practises her debaucheries under the cloak of the most tremendous hypocrisy that ever veiled the dissolute life of a Messalina!" ejaculated Eugene Montgomery.

"Proofs!—do you require proofs?" exclaimed Florimel. "And if you possessed them——"

"I think that I could silence her relative to any unfortunate admission which, in a moment of infatuated madness, I was beguiled to make," said the Earl, eagerly.

"Then behold the proofs!" cried Florimel, producing two pieces of drapery and handing them to Montgomery, who received them with mingled surprise and incredulity. "These are cut from the curtains in the boudoir where utter darkness was wont to throw its veil upon the wanton revels of that lascivious woman and her paramours. Display them before her eyes—and she will sink, ashamed and humiliated, at your feet. Caroline Walters possessed herself of them —and she gave them to me when I visited her ere now."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks, Gabriel!" cried Montgomery, his countenance lighting up with joy. "You have indeed proved yourself a friend —a sincere and loving friend—on the present occasion!"

"I do not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, Eugene," said Lord Florimel: "and therefore I do not ask you how you have placed yourself in that woman's power. But when I learnt from the lips of the dying Caroline that you had encountered the Unknown at the masquerade, and when I remembered that you were battling against each other in affairs of the utmost importance to both, it struck me

that a syren so proficient in all the artfulness of a captivating seductiveness would not have allowed such an opportunity to escape. I felt assured that she must have probed your heart to the very bottom—wormed out of you all your most sacred secrets——and every man *has* his secrets, of some kind or another——"

"True, true," exclaimed Montgomery, with nervous excitement.

"Knowing, I say, her disposition and her character," continued Florimel, "and suspecting that she would not fail to turn to her own purposes the accident which threw you into her arms, I thought that I would come and give you a warning which I foresaw must prove useful. I was aware, moreover, that this is the day on which you reckon so much: and hence the early visit which I have paid you and my importunity to see you."

"You have conferred upon me an obligation which I can never forget," said the Earl, pressing his friend's hand with the warm effusion of gratitude. "Alas! I have this morning received terrible tidings. My poor brother Raymond is no more: he has been foully murdered——"

"Murdered!" repeated Florimel, with the convulsive start of unfeigned horror.

"Yes — murdered — most foully, diabolically murdered," exclaimed the Earl with an outburst of grief that was apparently most violent and rending. "But I have not time to enter into particulars now, Gabriel," he added, in a less excited but deeper voice: "and moreover I recollect that I have not as yet broken the dreadful intelligence to my poor mother, who will be driven to despair!"

"This is shocking—most shocking, my poor friend," said Lord Florimel, his tone and manner displaying the deepest sympathy. "But you must lose no time in revealing the lamentable occurrence to the Countess: for should it reach her abruptly and without due preparation, from any other source, it may prove a mortal blow."

"That is what I fear," said the Earl: "and I will therefore lose no time in discharging this most painful—most agonizing task."

"I sincerely sympathise with you, Eugene," exclaimed Lord Florimel: and, unwilling any longer to intrude upon his friend's privacy, the young nobleman took his departure.

The moment he was gone, Lord Montgomery repaired to his mother's apartment, where he gradually broke to her the intelligence of her younger son's death. The wild agony of grief into which the unhappy lady was thrown, exceeds all power of description: her haughty, overbearing nature was bent, crushed, and overwhelmed beneath the stupendous weight of affliction which thus came down upon her. She raved—she tore her hair—she beat her bosom—and then she fell into a kind of torpor which lasted till medical aid arrived.

The Earl watched his mother narrowly throughout those paroxysms, until their agony was absorbed in the numbness of a partial stupefaction. The significance of every working of her countenance did he scrutinize—the meaning of every word she uttered did he catch with an intense anxiety; but he could not trace therein the slightest indication of any dark suspicion on her part. No—the poor lady imagined that her younger son had been foully dealt with by murderous robbers; and when, after the arrival of medical assistance, she regained full possession of her faculties, the piteous lamentations which she poured forth all proved that such indeed was the painful idea she entertained on the subject.

With a sensation of indescribable relief, amounting almost to a triumphant satisfaction, the Earl entrusted his mother to the care of the medical men and her own female attendants;—but with every outward symptom of a heart-felt woe, he ordered his carriage and drove straight to the dwelling of Lord and Lady Holderness in Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER CCXXVI.

THE LAW SUIT.

In those by-gone days when the "wisdom of our ancestors" is supposed to have flourished so pre-eminently, many curious conditions were frequently attached to the heritage of estates, the enjoyment of real property, and the succession to testamentary bequests. In those ages when the Roman Catholic Church was dominant in England, the inheritance of a vast fortune or an immense estate was frequently made conditional upon taking the oath in acknowledgment of the papal supremacy, or in confirming some monastic establishment in the enjoyment of certain tenures, rentals, privileges, and immunities: and, oftener still, the heir of a small property found himself obliged to make certain oblations to a particular shrine or pay for so many masses to be chaunted on behalf of his predecessor's soul. On the other hand, and in later times, when Protestantism had erected its temples upon the ruins of the papal establishments, the fanatic holders of estates frequently bound their posterity, as the condition of inheritance, to make a vow abjuring the Romish doctrines altogether;—and it is well known that many estates are inherited at the present day upon conditions which, though pared down into the simplest technicality or merest form, nevertheless originated in some such ancestral prejudices or whimsicalities as those at which we have hastily glanced.

A condition of this nature was traditionary in the Montgomery family; and thus it arose:—In the reign of Queen Elizabeth the *Bellenden* race was threatened with extinction, the then possessor of the Marquisate being eighty years of age, childless, and without any near relatives. He accordingly adopted the second son of the then Earl Montgomery; and Queen Elizabeth granted letters patent to enable the youthful scion of the *Montgomerys* to inherit the title of *Bellenden* in pursuance of that adoption. At the death of the old Marquis, therefore, the young Montgomery became possessor of the honours, rank, and estates of Bellenden; and he married a lady belonging to the family of *Aylmer*. They had one son, who, on growing up to man's estate, was seized with a violent inclination to travel upon the continent; and he set off accordingly. But years and years passed without affording any tidings of him; and his parents advanced towards the grave in the painful belief that their only son was no more. The disconsolate father was accordingly necessitated to make some testamentary arrangements relative to

the disposal of his property at his death; and he bequeathed his Priory estates to the then Earl of Montgomery, and the Warwickshire estates partially to that Earl's brother and partially to the Aylmer family. But as there had recently been a monastery upon the Warwickshire estates, the old nobleman, who abhorred papacy, inserted a clause in his will to the effect that the heritage depended and was made conditional upon the formal abjuration of the doctrines of the Romish church; and the heir was likewise required to sign a formal pledge that he would never rebuild nor restore that monastery, which had been destroyed in the reign of Henry the Eighth. In default of signing this abjuration and promise, the forfeiture of the Warwickshire estates to the next heirs was to be the consequence. The clause in the will prescribing these conditions, stipulated that the deeds of abnegation were to be duly signed and recorded on or before the heir's attainment of the age of twenty-two (which in those days was the period of majority); and moreover, the same will settled the entail of all the estates, thenceforth and for ever, in such a manner that the possessor of the Earldom of Montgomery should always hold the Priory property in the vicinage of London, and his nearest relative the larger portion of the Warwickshire estates, the smaller section of which was to be enjoyed by the Aylmers. Such were the terms of the will made by the Marquis of Bellenden who lived in the latter half of the sixteenth century. But scarcely had the grave closed over him, when his son—the long lost one—returned to England, after having escaped from a lengthened and horrible condition of slavery into which he had been sold by Algerine pirates. As a matter of course he claimed the paternal estates; and the Montgomerys of that day, either through ignorance of the specific terms of the will made in their favour, or else through good feeling, did not attempt the slightest opposition. The existence of the will itself was soon forgotten: years and years passed away—and the Bellendens continued to inherit and enjoy undisputedly the vast estates which bore their name, until a prying, penetrating, astute attorney discovered the famous will and brought it to light. This occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, about the time of the Great Rebellion; and the then Earl of Montgomery, on being apprised of the nature of the will, threatened the then Marquis of Bellenden with a law-suit. The matter was however compromised without litigation: the then Marquis of Bellenden agreed to make over to the Montgomerys a certain portion of the estates as a settlement of the points at issue. This was done: and the Conveyance Deed was duly drawn up and signed. But scarcely had the transfer been thus made, when the Montgomerys were plunged into serious pecuniary difficulties by the failure of certain speculations; and the then Marquis of Bellenden proposed to advance a large sum of money to re-purchase the portion of his estates which had been transferred. This transaction took place: the money was paid—and the conveyance-deed was restored to the Bellendens. The whole matter then slept for about twenty years:—when the Montgomerys initiated law-proceeding in good earnest. This step was taken by Eugene Montgomery's father, about thirty years previously to the date of our narrative; and as the matter was in due course more closely looked into, it transpired after a time that if the Montgomerys' claims were good at all, it must be Raymond on whom the Warwickshire property would devolve, while the Priory estates would fall into the hands of his elder brother. Eventually the Aylmers asserted their pretensions;—and thus originated and progressed the memorable law-suit of which so much has been said in the course of our narrative.

The reader will now understand how great was the importance necessarily attached to the Conveyance Deed above mentioned. On the side of Lady Bellenden it was urged that this deed contained the terms and evidences of a final compromise effected between the litigant families,—a compromise which quashed the Montgomerys' rights and claims for ever. On behalf of Fernanda—or rather Lady Holderness—it was urged that her family had been no parties to the compromise at all, they at the time being actually ignorant of the circumstance that they had any claims or pretensions whatsoever to a single acre of the Bellenden property. Lastly, on behalf of the Montgomerys it was at first alleged that their predecessor had no power to make any such compromise in a matter where, if the claims were good at all, the estates were all partitioned and entailed in a particular manner and upon specific conditions: and within the last three months of the suit, Eugene Montgomery had advanced another and more formidable plea—which was to the effect that the Conveyance Deed was a forgery, although he did not charge the Marchioness of Bellenden with having fabricated it.

The Conveyance Deed bore the date of 1795: but it was alleged, on behalf of Eugene Montgomery, that the Marquis of Bellenden (the father of Lady Bellenden's late husband) whose name was alleged to be affixed to that document, had died in the year 1793—consequently that he had been dead two years at the time when he was represented to have signed the deed. In proof of these statements Earl Montgomery advanced the facts that the plate upon the coffin of the Marquis of Bellenden alluded to, bore the date of 1793; and that the parish Register of Deaths, containing the entry of the said Marquis's demise, furnished the same date.

Such was the position of the law-suit on the 31st of May—the period fixed by the Master in Chancery for delivering his report upon the various points at issue. Nor did the legal functionary fail to keep his engagement—an occurrence in Chancery proceedings which deserves special mention. The report was ready; and its tendency was precisely as Mr. Rigden had foreseen—namely, in favour of his clients and hostile to Lady Bellenden. In short, the Master admitted the validity of Fernanda's plea that her family were no parties to the alleged compromise, even if any such compromise had taken place at all: and therefore, whether the Conveyance Deed were a forgery or a genuine document, the lady's claims were pronounced valid. With regard to the Montgomerys, the Master thought that if the Conveyance Deed were genuine, their claims must be considered as null and void: but he did not believe it to be genuine—he was of opinion that the proofs of forgery were sufficient, and indeed unanswerable—and he therefore pronounced in favour of the claims of the Montgomery family. Finally, and inasmuch as it appeared that one of the claimants

(Lord Raymond Montgomery) was not forthcoming, but was reported to be dead,—and inasmuch as it was at all events certain that he had not complied with the conditions laid down in the will of his ancestor,—it would result from the various points treated of in the Report, that the Right Honourable the Earl Montgomery had established his claims to the Priory property altogether; and that the Warwickshire estates must be partitioned between the said Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, in the proportion of one-third to the former and of the remaining two-thirds to the latter.

Such was the Report of the Master in Chancery; and although it operated not as a final decision, yet was it regarded as the basis on which the Lord Chancellor's judgment would be eventually founded. In a word, then, the triumph of Earl Montgomery and Fernanda over the Marchioness of Bellenden was regarded as complete by the gentlemen of the long robe.

CHAPTER CCXXVII.

THE FIRST ORDEAL.

It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, that Eugene Montgomery and Lady Holderness alighted from a carriage at the gate of Bellenden Priory. They were immediately conducted into the drawing-room, the servant informing them that the Marchioness would join them in a few minutes.

The moment the domestic had retired, the Earl said in a low hurried voice to his beautiful cousin, "I wonder what terms Laura is about to propose?"

"You have already wondered, Eugene, a thousand times since we received her note inviting us hither," observed Fernanda: "and all the wondering in the world will not help you to a solution of the mystery."

"Do you think it is a snare, my dear cousin?" inquired the Earl.

"For what purpose?" exclaimed Lady Holderness. "If Laura meant to hand us over to the grasp of justice, she need not have invited us hither for the purpose; she could have more easily sent the constables to our houses."

"How coolly—how dauntlessly you take everything, Fernanda!" said the Earl, contemplating her with mingled admiration and envy. "You would have made an excellent General for an army of Amazons."

"I certainly do not meet misfortunes half-way," observed Lady Holderness, smiling: then instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she said, "For heaven's sake, do not be pusillanimous, Eugene! You are trembling with nervous excitement—your agitation is positively visible! Take courage: we have gained the suit—and Laura is doubtless anxious to make terms. In fact, she says as much in the letter which she sent just now to request us to call upon her, and in pursuance of which invitation we are now seated beneath the roof of Bellenden Priory. I wonder whether she will ask you to accompany her to the boudoir," added Fernanda, with an arch look.

"Were you not astonished when I revealed all those startling things to you this morning?" said the Earl.

"I must confess that I was amazed," replied Fernanda. "Not that I ever entertained a particularly high opinion of my own sex——"

"Because you yourself are a wanton, my sweet cousin," interrupted the Earl, patting Fernanda's cheek familiarly. "But tell me—are you very much afflicted by the death of Lord Desborough? and why are you not in mourning?"

"As for being afflicted, Eugene," returned the heartless lady, "I have no leisure to devote to grief; and as for the mourning, I have not had time to order it. The intelligence of the accident which proved fatal to my uncle, only reached London last night—and all my thoughts have been engrossed by the law-suit."

"It struck me that your husband seemed very care worn and ill," observed Eugene. "He evidently was not over well pleased at my soliciting an interview with you alone this morning—still less at your accompanying me *tete-à-tete* in my carriage——"

"He doubtless supposes that I ought to have no secrets from him," observed Fernanda, hastily.

"And he is also rather jealous, perhaps?" said the nobleman, whose spirits appeared to be reviving somewhat.

"Think you, Eugene," said Fernanda, her scarlet lip curling with contempt, "that I am a being to be in any way moved or ruffled—unless it be to scorn — by a jealous man? No — no: I am too strong-minded to heed the more grovelling passions of human nature, when there are so many fiery and fierce ones meriting attention and worthy to stir up deep feelings."

"Whence comes this marvellous strength of mind — this indomitable courage on your part, fair cousin?" demanded Montgomery, with an expression of interest and curiosity.

"It is partly constitutional," replied Fernanda; "and it partly arises from the circumstance that I have taught myself to despise death, come in what shape it may. Or rather," she added, her voice sinking to the lowest audible whisper, while her violet eyes deepened into a sinister blackness,—"or rather, I am always prepared to encounter death, and even to rush forward to meet it in case of emergency."

"What mean you, Fernanda?" asked Eugene, gazing upon his cousin in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean," she responded, in that low deep voice which was scarcely audible and seemed like the end of a harmony dying away,—"I mean that I am always prepared for the last extremity, rather than endure exposure!"—and as she spoke she drew from her bosom a small phial, not so large as her own little finger, and which contained a few drops of a fluid colourless as water. "Now do you understand me, Eugene?" she said, in a louder tone and with an accent of triumph, as she replaced the phial in the corsage of her dress.

"I do — I do," returned Lord Montgomery: then, after a few moments' pause, he added, "And should not I adopt a similar precaution?—should not I also carry about with me the means of instantaneous death?"

"I question, Eugene, whether your crimes are

so numerous as mine," said Lady Holderness, fixing upon him strange looks of sinister mystery: "and if they are not, you do not incur so many and such constant chances of detection as I do."

"Good God! what would you have me understand?" exclaimed Montgomery, startled by these words which seemed thrown out as the preface to some fearful revelation. "Have you committed any crimes beyond that which——you know what I mean——"

"The one that we perpetrated together — or rather caused to be perpetrated," added Fernanda; "and of which we shall doubtless hear mention made by the Marchioness presently —— But how long she is keeping us waiting!"

"Hush! she comes," whispered Montgomery in a hurried manner as he heard footsteps approaching.

The next instant the door was thrown open—and the Marchioness of Bellenden entered the drawing-room. She was clad in her usual mourning garb; and her countenance, though somewhat pale, wore that expression of sereneness which amounted to a benignity that nothing appeared able to disturb or ruffle. At the same time there was a certain dignified self-possession in her looks and manner which seemed to denote a mind not only at ease in respect to the opinion of the world, but also with regard to its own secret thoughts.

Advancing thus into the room with a mingled graciousness and matron-like dignity, the Marchioness of Bellenden saluted Lady Holderness and Earl Montgomery with a sufficient courtesy to be consistent with her position as the lady of the mansion, and with just enough reserve to convince them that she was by no means disposed to cringe and fawn although the law-suit was as good as decided in their favour.

Placing herself upon a sofa, she made a motion for Fernanda to take a seat by her side—while she indicated a chair close at hand for the Earl. And thus were the three relatives grouped together,—those three relatives, two of whom had been waging such a desperate warfare against the third!

While proceeding to take the chair pointed out to him, Lord Montgomery threw a hurried, furtive, but scrutinising look upon Lady Bellenden, as if he sought to pierce down into the very profundities of her soul;—aye, and more than that—for the searching glance had also a less refined object; inasmuch as it endeavoured to penetrate her very garments and trace beneath them every contour and every outline of the splendid form which they enveloped. And at the same time he thought within himself, as his looks swept over her placid —almost heavenly countenance, "Is it possible that a volcano of raging desires and frenetic passions lies concealed beneath that calm and tranquil exterior?"

While he was asking himself this question he encountered her glance—and it struck him that a slight flush appeared upon her cheeks and that a momentary embarrassment sprang up in her manner: but on darting another rapid, furtive look upon her, he found her aspect as serene and her deportment as untroubled as at first.

"I know not what to think," said Montgomery within himself: "she is either the most accomplished hypocrite that ever out-heroded Satan's duplicity—or else Florimel must have been deceived concerning her! But we shall see—we shall see," he added, in his silent musings;—and his doubt and uncertainty increased as he flung another look upon the Marchioness whose serenity bespoke a mind so profoundly at peace within itself and with all the world.

Meantime Fernanda had also taken her survey of Lady Bellenden—but in a less furtive manner than was observed by her cousin Eugene. Indeed, she had fixed her fine violet-coloured eyes full upon the countenance of the Marchioness, who however met their steadfast gaze with the most imperturbable tranquillity: and when the Earl noticed this farther proof of extreme self-possession on her part, he was all the more perplexed—all the more bewildered. He knew not what to think: he could not possibly form a conjecture as to the probable result of the present interview. Would it end in exposure and ruin to all?—or would it terminate amicably? Was the Marchioness about to enact the part of a suppliant or a dictatrix?—would she make use of conciliation or of menace?

All those rapid exchangings of looks, and all those thoughts that swept not only through the brain of Eugene Montgomery, but likewise of Fernanda herself, occupied but a few moments in reality, although they have taken us as many minutes to describe. For, in fact, almost immediately after Lady Bellenden joined her visitors in the manner narrated, the proceedings commenced.

"You were doubtless surprised," said the Marchioness, glancing first at Eugene and then at Fernanda, "to receive a note from me requesting your presence here. But on learning the result of the step which the law-suit advanced this morning, I thought it better that we three who are so deeply interested in that process should assemble and try the case for ourselves, so as to avoid the expense of any further litigation."

"Try the case for ourselves!" echoed Fernanda, gazing upon the Marchioness with indignant surprise.

"We are already in as good a position as if we had won it!" exclaimed Lord Montgomery.

"But you will both be so kind as to remember that it is not irrevocably won yet," said the Marchioness, with all the coolness of an imperturbable self-possession. "The Chancellor must pronounce his judgment——"

"It will be based upon the Master's Report," cried Fernanda, petulantly.

"Additional evidence may be offered, Lady Holderness," returned the Marchioness, in her quiet manner the very serenity of which was a reproof and a warning.

"Additional evidence!" repeated Earl Montgomery, feeling that this ejaculatory taking up of Lady Bellenden's words would bring the discourse to a crisis.

"Yes—additional evidence, my lord," replied the Marchioness: "and inasmuch as the testimony to which I allude will throw much additional light upon the case, I repeat my proposition that we three should constitute ourselves the judges thereof—and I will answer for it that within a couple of hours we shall come to a decision, whereas in Chancery we may still be kept waiting for years. Now, Lord Montgomery—and you Lady Holderness—what say you?"

"Is this a jest, madam?" inquired Fernanda, burning with vexation and spite.

"I never was more serious in my life," returned the Marchioness; "and you have no idea how *very* serious the matter may also be made for yourself and Lord Montgomery, if you reject my proposition for investigating it amicably. In plain terms, the evidence I have to bring forward, *must* be produced somewhere;—but whether in this drawing-room before our three selves, or in the presence of a still more solemn and certainly more terrible tribunal, I now leave for you to decide."

"Let us humour her ladyship and play at judges, Eugene," said Fernanda, her eyes flashing with the fires of concentrated rage—a rage which was enhanced by the apparently unprovokable calmness of Lady Bellenden.

"Well, let us play at judges, then," added Montgomery, wondering what was to follow.

The Marchioness took a silver hand-bell from under the cushion of the sofa, and rang it. A door at the farther extremity of the room opened—and an old man made his appearance.

"Austin!" ejaculated Lord Montgomery, thrown off his guard by this unexpected incident.

"Ah! I see that you know him, then?" cried Lady Bellenden: and turning towards the man, she said, "Do you also recognise this gentleman and this lady?"

"Since your ladyship has bribed me to come over to your side, I must speak out plain, I suppose," said Austin, putting a bold front upon the matter. "The truth is, then, that I know Earl Montgomery there as well as one man can know another; and I am also aware that the lady is Miss Fernanda Aylmer—or I should say, Lady Holderness."

"What have you in particular to relate concerning them?" demanded the Marchioness, with a solemn seriousness alike of tone and manner.

"Upwards of four months ago the Earl came down alone to my cottage near Bellenden village," resumed Austin, "and told me that if I would serve him in a particular manner he would recompense me well. I agreed; and he ordered me to go to Birmingham and procure several things which he named."

"What were they?" inquired the Marchioness.

"First, some skeleton keys that would open locks of any size, from a church-door down to an iron safe—next, some implements such as resurrection men use, and a box of their peculiar cement—and third, a coffin-plate with a particular inscription upon it. Those were the articles," continued Austin, "which I was ordered by my lord to obtain; and I did so, with the assistance of some friends that I went to at Birmingham. About three weeks after that, as near as I can guess, his lordship sent me a letter to say that he should be at my cottage on a particular morning, along with Miss Aylmer and two men—and that I was to lay in quantities of provender."

"And they arrived accordingly?" said the Marchioness.

"Yes, my lady—they came in a carriage on the morning named in the letter," returned Austin. "The Earl and Miss Aylmer wore masks; and the two men were the greatest ruffians I ever set eyes upon. Miss Aylmer went away in the carriage, which took her to Congleton: but at night it came back without her——"

"Never mind that point," interrupted the Marchioness. "What happened on the night of which you have just spoken?"

"The Earl and the two men went to the church, taking the implements, the cement, and the skeleton keys along with them——"

"And the coffin-plate?" inquired the Marchioness.

"Yes—his lordship had that with him also," responded Austin.

"And what was the inscription upon it?" pursued Lady Bellenden.

"It gave the year 1743 as the date of the death of the last Marquis's father," was the response.

"That will do," said the Marchioness. "You may retire, and send in the next witness."

Throughout the preceding examination, Lord Montgomery had remained leaning back in his chair, with his arms folded across his breast, and his eyes gazing up towards the ceiling: while Fernanda assumed a lounging posture upon the sofa, and appeared to treat the whole affair with sovereign contempt.

Austin retired;—and forth from the inner room came a very aged woman, but who nevertheless walked with a wonderful agility.

"Ah! and Widow Bushman also!" ejaculated the Earl, who had turned his head to glance at the new witness: then instantly resuming his former attitude, he seemed to be intent only on contemplating the chandelier which was suspended to the ceiling.

"Do you know this gentleman and lady?" demanded Laura: "and if so, what can you tell me about them?"

"I know Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, late the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer," replied the crone. "Three months ago Lady Holderness came all in a hurry to my cottage near Congleton, and ordered me to prepare to receive the Earl and two men who would arrive within the ensuing twenty-four hours. She likewise bade me go into Congleton and purchase a couple of trunks each of which was to be filled with a quantity of apparel suitable for working-men about to emigrate. This I did—and her ladyship went away. Next morning at daybreak the Earl and two men came. The latter were the most murderous-looking villains I ever saw: but their appearance was a little improved when they had shaved, washed, and put on their new clothes."

"While the Earl and the two men were at your cottage," asked Lady Bellenden, "did you commit any oversight of which you have a recollection?"

"I remember addressing the Earl as '*My lord*,'" replied Widow Bushman, "although particularly enjoined by Miss Aylmer—Lady Holderness, I mean—to be careful on that head. His lordship was terribly angry——"

"That will do, my good woman," said the Marchioness. "You may retire—and be kind enough to send in the next witness."

"Is this child's play to last much longer, madam?" demanded Fernanda, no longer able to restrain her impatience beneath the air of contemptuous indifference which she had been assuming.

"Let her ladyship pursue her own course, Fernanda," exclaimed Earl Montgomery, in a bitter tone. "This is our ordeal: she will have to pass through *her's* presently."

Lady Bellenden started slightly and threw a furtive sidelong look of uneasiness upon the nobleman: but instantaneously recovering herself, she turned her eyes in the direction of the inner room. A third witness had just appeared in the form of a red-haired, scraggy, repulsive-looking young woman, with a very vixenish expression of countenance. She was totally unknown to both Montgomery and Fernanda; and though they did not choose to allow their features to show that they were at all interested in this new phase of the proceedings, they were nevertheless secretly filled with anxiety and curiosity in this respect.

"What is your name?" asked Lady Bellenden, who conducted the inquiry with all the precision and solemnity of an Old Bailey pleader.

"Mary Price, please your ladyship," was the answer; "and my father is one of the men whom his lordship, Earl Montgomery, hired to do a certain business down in the country. Joseph Warren is the other: and they're now both in Newgate."

"And what was the nature of the business you refer to?" continued the Marchioness.

"To put a handsome young gentleman out of the way, by burying him alive in the buttress of a bridge," returned Carrotty Poll.

"There was a lady present on the occasion, I believe?" said the Marchioness: "and the young gentleman ejaculated some name——"

"*Fernanda*," said Carrotty Poll.

Lady Holderness threw a fierce look upon the Big Beggarman's daughter and the Marchioness of Bellenden—then biting her scarlet lip almost till the blood came, she averted her head and resumed an aspect of consummate indifference.

"The murder of the young gentleman was not the only proceeding in which your father and his friend were engaged?" said Lady Bellenden, inquiringly.

"No, ma'am," returned Carrotty Poll. "There

was an entrance by night into a church—the opening of a vault—and a little affair with the parish register: but in this last business the Earl only was concerned."

"What proof have you of the opening of the vault?" asked Laura.

"This ring, taken off the finger of a dead body which was all exposed in its coffin," replied the red-haired witness: and she produced the jewel in question.

"It bears the crest of the Bellendens," observed the Marchioness. "The young woman," she continued in explanation, "called upon me this morning to know whether certain intelligence which she was able to give relative to some proceedings in the country would be useful to me, inasmuch as she had reason to believe the information bore materially upon the pending law-suit. She stipulated for a large reward, which I have given her;—and she has remained until this evening to repeat her testimony in your presence and proclaim all she knows. Have you any questions to ask her?"

Lord Montgomery made no reply, but kept his looks fixed upon the chandelier; and Lady Holderness tossed her head with a renewed air of indignant impatience.

"You may retire," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"But your ladyship had better command this witness and all the others," cried the Earl, as a thought suddenly struck him, "to remain quietly beneath this roof until the conclusion of the present proceedings: inasmuch as it will probably seem advisable to your ladyship, in the long run, to place the seal of strictest secrecy upon their lips—which no doubt can be done by means of your ladyship's gold," he added, bitterly. "In a word, I warn your ladyship, that if an exposure should take place, the honour and lives of Fernanda and myself will not be *alone* involved."

The looks of the Marchioness gradually became troubled as the Earl spoke: but conquering her emotions, she regained her usual calmness with a surprising promptitude, although Fernanda darted upon her a fiendish glance of mingled menace, hatred, and defiance.

"The witnesses will do nothing and say nothing *elsewhere*, unless in obedience to my orders," she observed: then, turning towards Carrotty Poll, who was still lingering in the room, she said, "Retire—and send in Mr. Roberts."

"The canting parson of Bellenden rectory," ejaculated the Earl, in a tone of contempt.

"I should perhaps inform you," said the Marchioness, taking no heed of the observation, "that the corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery has been discovered in the buttress of Malden Bridge: but this intelligence has of course reached you, inasmuch as Mr. Rigden's clerk was present on the occasion, and evidence thereof was duly given before the Master in Chancery this forenoon."

While Lady Bellenden was yet speaking, Mr. Roberts entered the room and bowed coldly to the Earl and Fernanda, who took not the slightest notice of him. The testimony which the reverend gentleman gave was to the effect that the vault of the Bellenden family had been opened and examined in his presence, and that a particular coffin-plate had been unscrewed and consigned to his care. This he produced. Austin was then recalled; and he at once affirmed that the plate was the same he had procured at Birmingham in compliance with the instructions of Earl Montgomery. When he had once more retired into the adjacent room, the Marchioness bade Mr. Roberts conclude his evidence; and the reverend gentleman proceeded to state that there was every reason to justify the belief that one of the registers of the parish of Bellenden had been tampered with in respect to the date properly belonging to the death of the last Marquis of Bellenden's father. The principal ground of this belief was the fact that an entry for the year 1743 was made, by the presumed alteration, to stand in the midst of a number of entries for the year 1745,—an irregularity in the consecutive order of the entries which could only be explained by the suspicion that the original words describing the date in full had been erased and others substituted.

Having thus brought his evidence to a termination, the Rev. Mr. Roberts withdrew.

"The farce is now at an end, I presume?" said Lord Montgomery, the moment the door had closed behind the rector.

"Call it what your lordship will," returned the Marchioness of Bellenden, "I think you must admit that the affair has assumed a somewhat serious aspect, and that if all this additional evidence were produced before a criminal tribunal, the Lord Chancellor would have to base his final judgment upon the result. Lady Holderness," continued Laura, turning towards her cousin, and addressing her with a deeper solemnity, "it is not difficult to comprehend the part which you played in the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Lord Raymond loved you with an attachment that bordered upon adoration; and his blighted affections prompted him to seek a solitude congenial with his morbid state of mind. But his destruction was necessary to forward the aims of yourself and Earl Montgomery: you coveted the possessions which he claimed—and you were determined to constitute yourselves the heirs to that property, in the presumption that success would likewise attend upon the measures you devised to give a particular turn to the law-proceedings. Your plans were settled accordingly—and when the bravos were hired and in readiness to act, it became no difficult matter to induce Lord Raymond to meet *you*, Lady Holderness, at an early hour in the morning, and in the immediate vicinage of the farm. Indeed, I can readily suppose that a few days previously you had written him a letter containing the most earnest assurances that you repented of your past cruelty towards him—that you had at length learnt to love him—and that you were ready and willing to become his bride. But, with that subtlety which never fails your ladyship, you devised some excuse for investing the whole proceeding with the utmost mystery: you perhaps told him in your letter that his mother, the Dowager-Countess was averse to the match, and that the people at the farm had been secretly bribed to watch all his actions. Your readiness of invention was at no loss to account for the appearance of the mask upon your features; and a young, ardent, impassioned lover, entertaining the hope that he was about to repair to Bellenden village to make you his bride, was not very likely to be accessible to suspicions of evil."

"Enough of all this!" exclaimed Eugene Mont-

gomery, starting from his chair. "Your ladyship is affecting to build a history upon *surmises of your own;* whereas all the details you have just explained with such accurate minuteness, are facts well known to you *from imprudent confessions on my part!*"

CHAPTER CCXXVIII.

THE SECOND ORDEAL.

On hearing these words, the Marchioness of Bellenden was seized with the sudden pallor of one on whose soul an accusation falls with the force of a blow abruptly dealt upon the head with a sledge-hammer: and though perhaps this accusation was not altogether unexpected on Laura's part, yet was her power of dissimulation inadequate to conceal the effect which it produced upon her.

"Your ladyship has compelled *us* to pass through an ordeal," continued the Earl, his eyes flashing with malignant hate and a savage triumph: "but I warned you ere now that *your* turn would come. The first ordeal, then, is passed: the second is on the point of commencing. *We* have been tortured beneath the harrows of your spite and rancour: *you* shall now undergo the same pleasant treatment at our hands."

"And inasmuch as you have summoned us hither that we may all three sit as judges and try our own case for ourselves," added Fernanda, her looks lowering ominously and her eyes shining with a sinister light,—"it is but fair and proper that *you* should listen as attentively to anything that we may have to bring forward, as *we* did to the evidence adduced on your side."

"I cannot object to such a course," said the Marchioness, who had by this time recovered her wonted self-possession and placid assurance. "But I presume that you do not deny the charges which have been so fully proven against you by my witnesses!"

"It is not worth while to deal in duplicity, Lady Bellenden," responded the Earl, resuming his seat; "and therefore I will at once plead guilty, on my own and Fernanda's part, to the various crimes alleged against us. Not that we glory in them: on the contrary, we may look back upon them with regret:—but they are irrevocable!"

"Regret!" echoed Lady Holderness, with a contemptuous curl of the lips: "I will not allow the term to be coupled with my name. In other respects, Eugene," she added, more mildly, "you may act as spokesman for us both."

"And I shall be as brief as possible," said the Earl: then, after a few moments' pause, he continued in the following manner, while keeping his eyes intently fixed upon the Marchioness of Bellenden:—"Your ladyship has adopted a course which is characterised by the most admirable cunning and astuteness. But, with all your powers of dissimulation, you could not avoid the tell-tale pallor which spread upon your cheek when I just now proclaimed a fact which was in itself an accusation against you. Ah! now you become nervous and uneasy once more;—and you are in suspense to learn how much *we* know of your past history—how far *we* can criminate you—and to what extent you have to fear us! Oh! it was a fine stroke of policy on your part to pay a visit to Warwickshire and cause certain investigations to be made as if you were altogether ignorant beforehand of what would be the results and to what discoveries those investigations would lead: whereas you well knew that the plate on the coffin-lid had been changed—that the register had been altered—and that Raymond Montgomery lay dead in the buttress of the bridge! Yes—all those circumstances you knew beforehand: because—infatuated, besotted fool that I was!—I revealed them to your ears when, in the mystic darkness of a voluptuous boudoir, my arms encircled your naked, palpitating form, and my head lay pillowed upon your bosom!"

"My lord—this insult—what means it?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, springing to her feet, while her countenance glowed with that deep crimson hue which is excited either by shame or by indignation, and which as frequently betokens outraged innocence as conscious guilt.

"I mean, cousin Laura," said Earl Montgomery, with a semi-smile of sardonic triumph,—"that beneath the placid exterior which you are wont to wear, an Etna of frantic passions is concealed—and that the garb of widowhood which you have worn for twenty years, is nothing more nor less than the veil which a consummate hypocrisy has thrown over a career of unbridled licentiousness!"

"Your calumny is as odious as it is false, my lord!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, her manner all of a sudden becoming so lofty and dignified and her looks so full of a proud assurance, that the Earl was staggered.

"Perhaps her ladyship would allow you to see her boudoir, Eugene," said Fernanda, in a tone of quiet sarcasm: "and although, from what you have told me, the scene of love, and infatuation, and folly, was involved in utter darkness,—yet may you have acquired a knowledge of the locality sufficiently distinct to be able to identify it."

"My indignation would prompt me to return a peremptory refusal to comply with any such suggestion," exclaimed the Marchioness, her manner acquiring a still loftier assurance; "but I feel so jealous of that reputation which is now assailed for the first time—at least within my hearing—that I shall unhesitatingly adopt any course which is calculated to refute the foul aspersion. Follow me."

And issuing from the room by the door that opened upon the landing, the Marchioness led the way along a passage, Fernanda and Eugene following close behind.

"This is my bed-chamber," said Laura, in a tone of proud confidence, as she stopped half way down the passage and threw open the door of an apartment.

"Your ladyship will excuse our impertinence if we enter it," said Lord Montgomery: but as he crossed the threshold, the rapid glance which he threw upon the draperies of the couch and the curtains of the windows showed him that they tallied not with the pieces which Lord Florimel had given him. "But this is not a boudoir?" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes intently upon the Marchioness.

"This is my boudoir," said the lady, at once throwing open another door, and leading the way to an inner room.

Again was Montgomery at fault. The draperies matched not the pieces: and moreover the arrange-

ments of the boudoir were totally different from those which he remembered so well, and according to which *the table stood between the sofa and the bed, and a large arm-chair was near the head of the bed itself.* But might not the curtains have been changed since the pieces were cut ont of them? and might not the arrangements of the room have been altered? These thoughts suggested another: and approaching the window, he looked forth. The casement was upon the southern side of the Priory,—that quarter of the building which has already been described as the one that had *preserved its monastic appearance, with its massive walls, long and deeply set windows, low doors, and high pointed roofs*:—and the casement whence Montgomery now looked out, commanded a view of the garden. From the gate in the front boundary-wall two distinct gravel-walks branched off, one leading to the principal entrance of the mansion (which was on the northern side), and the other threading a shrubbery of evergreens and leading to the middle of the southern side.

"It was by this latter path that I was led blindfold on the night of my visit to the boudoir," thought Montgomery within himself, as he thus carefully examined the details of the locality. "Yes—there can be no doubt of it. My calculations do not err—and the door by which I was conducted into the building must be on this same side! Then the passage which we have now been threading assuredly leads to the staircase communicating with that door."

These thoughts passed rapidly through the mind of the Earl: and turning away from the window, he threw a quick and searching glance upon Lady Bellenden. That look, taking her as it were unawares, surprised upon her countenance the reflection of a feeling of uneasiness which was troubling her mind at the moment, as if she had penetrated into the motives of his survey from the window, and dreaded the surmises that he was sure to deduce therefrom.

"Well, my lord," she said, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and resuming a look of offended dignity, "do you behold aught in the appearance of this chamber to warrant the belief that you have ever been here before?"

"Nothing," was the laconic reply.

The Marchioness accordingly led the way out of the boudoir through the bed-chamber into the passage, along which she began to retrace her steps towards the landing, when the Earl exclaimed, "With your permission, Lady Bellenden, we will proceed in *this* direction."

And he sped towards the farther extremity of the corridor, passing in his way the doors of two or three apartments.

"My lord, remember that this is not your own house!" cried the Marchioness, in a tone of mingled rage and terror, which she could no longer subdue. "This proceeding is most unwarrantable—most indelicate on your part! Do you hear me, my lord?"

"Ah! now I am upon the right track!" exclaimed the Earl, heedless of the lady's remonstrance. "Come hither, Fernanda—come hither!"

Lady Holderness was immediately by Eugene's side; and she found that he had halted at the top of a staircase looking down at a door which stood at the bottom.

"Yes—all my suspicions are confirmed—or rather my doubts are dispelled," he said, in a rapid tone of joyous excitement. "That is the door by which I entered the building on the memorable night of mystery and infatuation: this is the staircase so thickly carpetted—and the *real* boudoir of darkness, perfume, and love must be reached by one of these doors which we have just passed by!"

"My lord, I command you to leave the private department of my dwelling, and return to the drawing-room," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, as she came hurrying along the passage, her features now ashy pale, her eyes dilating with rage and terror, and her lips white and quivering. "Do you hear me, my lord?" she cried, as she clutched the Earl violently by the arm.

"Beautiful Laura," said the nobleman, with a mocking smile; "you were not thus ferocious when you conducted me blindfold along this passage to the boudoir of love and darkness!"

And disengaging himself from her convulsive grasp, he returned rapidly up the passage until he reached the first door on the right hand, which he endeavoured to open. It was locked: but without an instant's hesitation, he burst it open with his foot—and then a cry of exultation thrilled from his lips!

Lady Holderness, who was following close behind him, looked back and flung a glance of malignant triumph upon Lady Bellenden, as this unhappy woman leant against the wall of the passage for support—so overpowered was she by feelings of mingled shame, fury, and despair.

"Yes—this is the mysterious boudoir," cried Earl Montgomery, as he entered the small but luxuriously-furnished apartment, the shutters of which were now open: "here is the sofa on which I lay, embraced in the arms of my *then* unknown syren—here is the table whence she took the wine that subsequently deprived me of consciousness—and there is the bed, with the arm-chair near it!"

"'Tis false—all false!" murmured a hoarse voice: and as the Earl and Fernanda, both of whom had advanced into the chamber, turned their heads hastily round, they beheld the Marchioness tottering over the threshold.

"'Tis true—all true!" exclaimed the Earl. "And if your ladyship requires proofs——"

"Proofs?" echoed Laura, with a sudden start. "What proofs——"

"These!" replied Montgomery: and he flung down the pieces of drapery upon the table.

"Ah! then I am indeed betrayed!" moaned the Marchioness of Bellenden: and staggering to the sofa, she threw herself upon it—covering her face with her hands at the same time.

"Yes—there can be no longer any doubt," said Lord Montgomery, as he compared the pieces of drapery with the hangings themselves. "But if the last link in the chain of evidence be required, here it is," he added, as he pointed to a spot in the window-curtain and another in that of the couch, whence the pieces had been cut away.

At the same moment the clock on the roof of the Priory proclaimed the hour of seven in the evening: and as the bell hung in a turret on the southern side of the building, it was plainly heard inside the boudoir.

"Ah! there is still another link in the chain!"

ejaculated Montgomery: "I could swear to that chime, beyond all possibility of doubt!"

"But after all," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, suddenly withdrawing her hands and revealing a countenance that was ghastly pale and bore the imprint of many deeply concentrated passions,—"after all, what matters this discovery which you have made? Ere now, my lord, you set a good example and discarded the use of any further duplicity: I will do the same and confess that I *am* the heroine of your night's adventure here—that I am the wanton, dissolute woman I then avowed myself to be! Yes—we all spring from a delectable race in *that* respect," she added, with the laugh of bitter scorn which has poison in its mirth: "the Montgomerys and the Aylmers never were celebrated for extreme morality,—and the same fires that circulate in your blood, Eugene—and in yours, Fernanda—have also rendered every vein in my body the conduit for a lava-stream! But what more can be alleged against *me?* Laura may be reproached as a wanton who veils her dissoluteness beneath a widow's garb and an outward aspect of piety: but Eugene and Fernanda are murderers,—murderers upon evidence—murderers by their own confession!"

And the words came thick, hoarse, and fraught with a deep malignity, from the tongue of that lady who appeared to have been suddenly changed from an angel of benevolence and Christian amenity into a demoness of revenge, hatred, and spite.

"Ah! then you push me to extremities," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and you have only yourself to thank if the work of retaliation proceeds to the end! Laura," he added, fixing his eyes upon her countenance with an expression of deep and omnious meaning,—"the terms upon which we stand are more equal than you appear inclined to acknowledge—for if Fernanda and I caused the death of Raymond Montgomery, *you* did the same by your own husband!"

The Marchioness gave a sudden start, as if a galvanic rod had touched her;—and desperately though she struggled against the confusion, terror, and dismay which seized upon her, the attempt was of no avail. The influence of conscious guilt was more powerful than all the arts of dissimulation in which she was so well skilled;—and as a mirror darkens suddenly with the image that passes before it, so did her features reflect the tremendous accusation which had just been levelled against her.

Nor did she now endeavour to fall back upon her hypocrisy or her guile: but as her mind gradually recovered its self-possession after this last shock, she put on a degree of hardihood and a front of boldness, as if clothing herself in the armour most fitting to meet her adversaries upon the level which crime had established.

"We now know enough of each other to render it desirable that our differences should be settled amicably," she said, in a deep voice and with looks of profound significancy.

"You speak truly, fair cousin," returned Montgomery: "inasmuch as open warfare will only lead to the destruction of all three. But in case of an amicable settlement, can you insure silence on the part of all those witnesses whom you have gathered together at the Priory?"

"Beyond all doubt," was the answer immediately given by Lady Bellenden. "And on your side——"

"I can guarantee that the secrets of this mysterious boudoir shall remain unknown," rejoined Montgomery; "and that the world shall never suspect that the late Marquis of Bellenden died by poison."

"And you, Fernanda," said the Marchioness, now adopting a more familiar style,—"are you agreeable to an amicable settlement?"

"Eugene has truly observed that we cannot continue at war without entailing destruction upon all three," replied Lady Holderness. "As for myself—I have no further animosity against you, Laura: because if you made us pass through an ordeal, we have done the same by you—and therefore we are quits. Nay, more—if you would permit me to offer you a suggestion, I might propound a plan by which the settlement of the whole affair would be easy and natural."

"Speak!" ejaculated the Earl and the Marchioness together: then, as a suspicion relative to Fernanda's meaning flashed to the brain of each at the same moment, they could not help exchanging half-smiles and significant looks.

"Ah! you already anticipate me, I perceive," exclaimed Lady Holderness. "Well, I declare it is the best plan you can adopt! Of course you will allow me to take that portion of the Warwickshire property which I have all along claimed and to which the Master has pronounced me entitled; and the sooner the Marchioness of Bellenden becomes Lady Montgomery, the better."

"Laura, you once called me your handsome Eugene—here—in this very room," said the Earl, forgetting all his past rancour, not only on the ground of expediency, but likewise because the boudoir had stirred up glowing reminiscences and voluptuous longings in his mind. "Yes—in this very room, Laura, did you pay me the most flattering compliments——"

"And I told you likewise that I was not altogether deficient in personal charms," interrupted Lady Bellenden, her features now expanding into a soft wanton smile; "and if you consider that I did not make an idle, silly vaunt——"

"I always declared that my cousin Laura was supremely handsome!" exclaimed the Earl, taking her hand and pressing it in his own.

"Therefore, entertaining such a favourable opinion of each other's personal appearance," said Fernanda, "there is no reason why you should not forgive and forget and become one."

"With all my heart," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, reading a fervid assent in the Earl's looks.

And then the strange compact was sealed by an embrace—and the lips of the woman who had poisoned her husband were pressed to those of the man who had murdered his brother;—and another aristocratic murderess was the witness of the scene!

CHAPTER CCXXIX.

A DEED OF VENGEANCE.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, on the day after the many and varied incidents just related, that Melmoth was walking through Knights-

bridge in the direction of Hyde Park. He was apparelled in the same decent manner as when he encountered Tim Meagles in the Edgeware Road a couple of days previously: but his countenance was more deadly pale—and mingled with its expression of wild vacancy and latent ferocity, there was a look of stern unflinching resolution, as if his mind were made up to the accomplishment of desperate deeds.

Entering Hyde Park, he traversed the vast enclosure with slow but firm steps; and the clocks of the West End were striking nine as he reached the immediate vicinage of Park Lane. Then he paused and fixed his eyes with some degree of anxiety upon the nearest gate: through which in a few minutes his eldest son James made his appearance.

"I am glad you are come, my boy," said Melmoth: "for I had my misgivings——"

"And why so, father?" asked the lad, who, it will be remembered was little more than thirteen years of age, and who was as respectably dressed as his parent. "What is the matter with you?"

"I dont know—a presentiment of evil, I suppose," exclaimed the man, abruptly. "In fact, considering the ways to which we have taken, we are never safe for an hour together; and therefore I was apprehensive and low-spirited. Where are your brother and sister?"

"At the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street, where we've been staying latterly," replied James. "There's plenty of other children of the same age at the Ken, you know: and the Kinchin-Grand is a good-natured fellow."

"Ah! he's already taught *you* the principles of his craft, Jem—eh?" said Melmoth: and he was shaken, despite of himself, with a strong convulsive shudder as he contemplated the son whom he had purposely handed over to the teaching of the consummate reprobate that accident had thrown in his way. "But let us change the topic," cried the man suddenly. "What news have you for me?"

"The pair of pistols you told me to buy are in my pocket," answered the youth.

"Come behind this tree," said Melmoth; "and give them to me. There! now I am delighted beyond measure!" he exclaimed, his countenance suddenly expressing a ferocious satisfaction and a glare of savage joy beaming in his eyes as he took the weapons from his son.

"What do you mean to do with them, father?—and where have you been all night?" inquired the lad, with a mingled apprehension and timidity.

"What I mean to do with the pistols, James, you may guess full easily if you will," said the man, a dark cloud settling upon his features. "Young as you are, I think you comprehend all that I have been endeavouring to instil into your mind since we met in the workhouse?—or is it possible that you have forgotten how deep are your father's wrongs, and how loudly your poor mother's death cries from the grave for vengeance?"

"No, no—I have forgotten nothing of all that," exclaimed the boy—trembling, or rather shivering as if under the influence of severe cold, although the weather was genial and warm.

"And yet you seem afraid, James?" said Melmoth, half angrily and half remorsefully.

"Afraid—no!" ejaculated the boy, instantly recovering his self-possession and his courage. "I am prepared to avenge your wrongs and my dear mother's death, father, in any way that you shall point out."

"And the surgeon's treatment of the poor baby, James?" observed Melmoth.

"Yes — and *that* also," responded the youth. "But our revenge in this respect will begin almost immediately: for 'tis past nine o'clock—and the nursery-maid will soon make her appearance with Thurston's child."

"You are sure that she walks regularly every morning in the park?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Have I not watched her for some days past? and have I not reported to you that she invariably comes out to give the infant an airing between nine and ten in the morning?" exclaimed the boy.

"True!" observed Melmoth. "I hope she will not fail to-day. And now, James," he continued, in a tone that was serious even to solemnity, "you must understand well and thoroughly all I mean and purpose with regard to this child. On becoming possessed of it, you will bear it straight off to the Kinchin-Ken, where you will give it to the girls to nurse; and you will become as it were its guardian, or its parent. That is to say, James, you will rear it in the midst of vice, profligacy, and debauchery—you will bring it up to be a thief from its infancy—and on no account will you divulge the secret of its parentage until it is at least ten or twelve years old, should it live till then. Rewards will be offered for its recovery—advertisements will be inserted in the newspapers—placards will be posted — and all possible means will no doubt be adopted by Thurston to recover his child. But remember all I have told you—and may my most withering curse alight upon your head if you disobey me!'

"Do not talk in this style, father," exclaimed the youth, shuddering at Melmoth's awful words and the vehemence with which they were delivered. "I have already sworn to do your bidding in everything—and I shall not fail in this instance. Poor baby shall be avenged!" added the boy, with bitter emphasis.

"Now you speak as my son—and I am proud of you, James," said Melmoth. "That cruel, cold-blooded, heartless surgeon did not hesitate to keep the poor babe's body to anatomise, or to figure in a bottle upon a shelf in his surgery: he doubtless thought that the poor had no feelings, and that he might do as he chose with the infant of the beggar-woman who died upon the door-steps of a rich man's dwelling! But he shall be taught that there is retribution for even such an outrage as this!" exclaimed Melmoth, with an expression of countenance that was now absolutely infernal. "Do you hear me, boy?—and do you understand me?"

"I do," was the response, delivered with a kindred acerbity of feeling and rancorous vibration of voice. "The child of that surgeon shall be reared as a beggar — trained to become a thief——"

"Until the age of ten or twelve, according as he is more or less imbued with the inveteracy of evil principles," added Melmoth: "and then, James—*then* shall you reveal to him the astounding secret that he is the son of Thurston the eminent doctor of May Fair!"

"And, on learning that secret, he can go home to his parents if he chooses," said the boy, with a

malignant laugh. "But those pistols, father—are they——"

"For the Prince?" exclaimed Melmoth, finishing the lad's sentence for him. "Yes—one is for the Prince, the author of all our woes——"

"And the other?" said the boy, gazing intently up into his father's haggard, sallow countenance.

"The other?" echoed Melmoth, in a musing tone: then, suddenly fixing his eyes with a fearful expression upon his son, he said, "James, you will soon be compelled to act as a father towards your little brother and sister, who will have no other father to depend upon!"

"No, no—you must not leave us in this manner!" exclaimed the youth, in a burst of wild anguish, as he caught hold of his father's hand: and he would have fallen at his feet, had not the iron grasp of Melmoth suddenly clutched his wrists and held him up.

"Boy, you must show more nerve than this!" ejaculated the monster-man, in a stern tone and with a look of menacing reproach. "The time for child's-play is passed—the season for indulging in soft emotions is over! We have a terrible duty to perform—a frightful vengeance to wreak—and we must not shrink from the task! Tell me, James—do *you* shrink?"—and Melmoth grasped his son's arm with the force of an iron vice closing upon it.

"No, no—I do not shrink, father!" exclaimed the youth. "The remembrance of my poor mother—how she wept over me—how she died in my presence,—and the recollection of *your* manifold wrongs also,—Oh! all this inspires me with the courage of desperation and the spirit of a demon—and you shall behold no more weakness on my part!"

"Bravely spoken!" cried Melmoth, now pressing his son's hand fervidly between both his own. "Just now you asked me a question concerning the manner in which I spent the past night. This will show you;"—and he produced from his pocket a soda-water bottle filled with combustible materials.

"What is the use of it, father?" demanded the boy, as he took the bottle in his hand.

"Some night, James," returned Melmoth, "you will make it your business to pass by the great mansion on the door-step of which your poor mother sank down and died: and if you hear the sounds of music issuing forth and behold the elegant forms of the dancers throwing their shadows upon the window-curtains as they glide onward to the notes of the sounding harmony, you will hurl that missile through the casement into the midst of the joyous company. Oh! I can promise you that the gay laughter will in a moment be changed to horrifying shrieks and bitter lamentations! But you must not wait to mark the results: the instant that your vigorous arm has thrown the missile, your feet must bear you with all possible speed away. Do you understand me?"

"I do, father," answered the lad, with a sombre desperation of voice and manner which proved full plainly that he purposed to carry out to the very letter all the details of the atrocious instructions thus minutely given: then, having secured the murderous though rudely-contrived engine about his person, he said, "Society will be shaken to its very centre by all that we now propose to do. When, dear father, shall you put into execution your plan relative to the Prince?"

"His Royal Highness," answered Melmoth, in a tone expressive of bitter, burning hatred towards the object of his remark, "has gone to pass a few days at Windsor Castle. If our affair relative to Thurston's child comes off successfully this morning, I shall proceed to Windsor without delay; and in less than four-and-twenty hours, perhaps, all England will be startled by the tremendous tidings that the heir-apparent to the throne has ceased to encumber the earth and disgrace humanity with his presence. Such is my intention, James," added Melmoth: "and therefore it may be, my boy, that you and I shall never meet again in this life."

"Must it be so, father?" said the youth, in a low, deep, tremulous voice, while the quivering of his lips and the tears that started into his eyes showed how impossible it was for him to restrain his feelings altogether—earnestly though he struggled against them.

"It must be so, James," replied Melmoth. "You would not have me spare the Prince?"

"No—ten thousand times *no!*" exclaimed the lad, resolutely.

"And you would not have me swing to the accursed gallow's-tree?" continued Melmoth.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the boy, with accents and looks of horror.

"Then if I slay the Prince," rejoined Melmoth, "you will comprehend that there is only *one* course for me to adopt!"

"Give me your hand for the last time, father," said James, with deeper accents and darker looks: then, as he pressed it fervidly, he added, "I already regard you as one who no more belongs to this world."

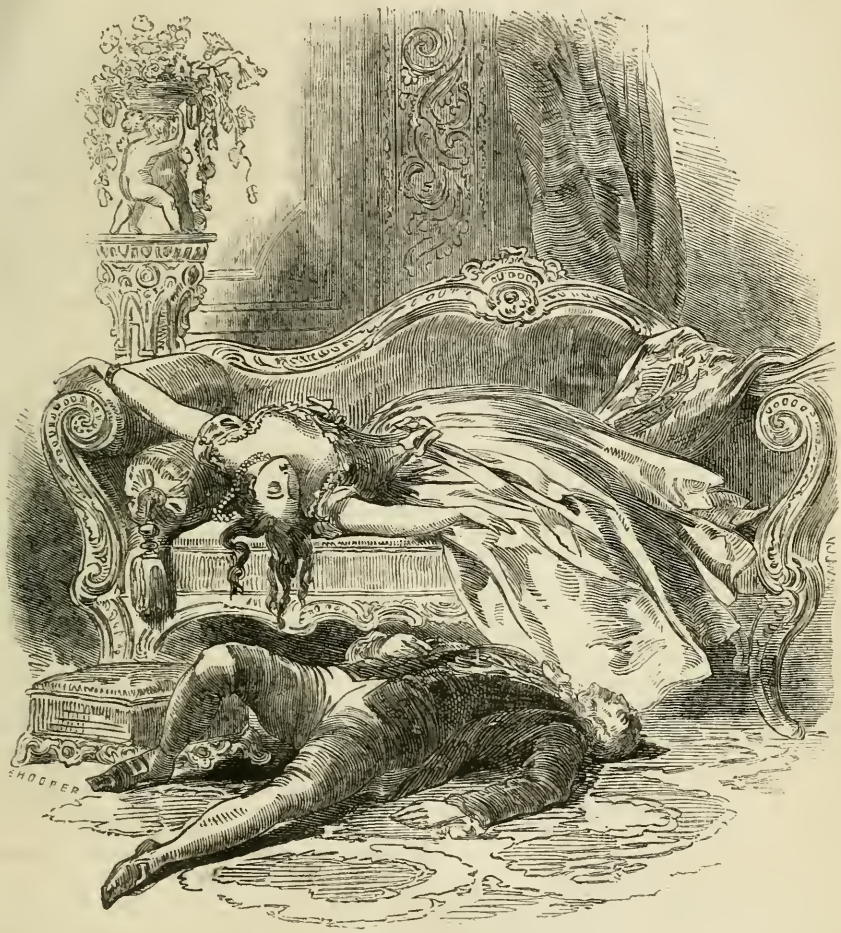
For a few instants the father and son gazed upon each other in ineffable tenderness mingled with utter desperation: and then, as if afraid to trust themselves any longer to the melting influence of that mood, they loosened the grasp of their hands and averted their eyes with simultaneous abruptness.

At the same moment a young woman, bearing a child in her arms, entered the park. She was a nursery-maid in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Thurston: and the infant, which was now five months old, was not the offspring of that couple, as Melmoth and his son supposed—but was the fruit of the Princess Sophia's illicit amour with General Barth.

The child was sleeping in the arms of the nurse, who began to stroll in a leisurely way across the park, not taking any heed of the man and the youth who followed her at a short distance. Presently she turned out of the gravel-path, and proceeded to a spot where a bench stood in the agreeable shade of some trees; and there she seated herself. Melmoth and his son gazed around; and perceiving that the coast was clear enough for their purpose, they at once walked up to the place where the female was resting.

"Young woman," said Melmoth, in an abrupt tone and with determined manner, "no harm is intended to yourself: but you must give me that child."

The servant-maid was struck speechless with consternation at these words: but she instinctively pressed the slumbering child more closely to her bosom, as she looked up with mingled terror and amazement into the countenance of the monster-man.



"I am serious—and I have no time to waste in dispute or explanations," said the latter, as he drew a pistol half out of his pocket: but instantly concealing it again, he added, "I don't want to act in a harsh or cowardly way towards you, young woman: so give me up the child at once—and you will run no danger of any kind."

The nurse was so overcome by the alarms which the appearance of the pistol had naturally excited in her breast, that she was unable to offer the least opposition or resistance as Melmoth took the child from her arms. Half fainting, she sank back against the trunk of the tree to which the bench was fixed: and while her brain swam round, a dimness came over her eyes.

The child still slept, as the monster-man consigned it to the arms of his son, whose heart smote him with remorse as he gazed upon the infantile countenance of dumb innocence.

"Must it be done, father?" he said, in a low deep tone.

"Remember the poor babe that was your mother's darling!" returned Melmoth, in a hoarse voice that was merciless and implacable.

"Yes—this deed of vengeance must be consummated!" instantly responded the boy, his own looks changing to sinister darkness.

"You swear, James—you swear, by your mother's memory," said Melmoth, "that you will show no pity and no remorse in carrying out this revenge according to the instructions I have given you?"

"I swear—most sacredly swear, by my mother's memory," rejoined the lad, encouraging all his acerbated feelings to collect their bitterness and arm him with the ferocity of a monster.

"Then farewell, James—farewell for ever!" said Melmoth, with a stoicism worthy of a better cause: and he turned his back upon the boy, whom he nevertheless loved so well.

"Farewell, father—dearest father!" was the tremulous reply which met his ears murmuringly;

and the words were instantaneously followed by the rapid retreat of footsteps over the grass.

A few minutes afterwards the servant-maid recovered herself sufficiently to experience a sense of the calamity which had occurred to her: and casting her looks in frenzied wildness around, she could see nothing of either the youth or the infant. But close by her side was the man whose sinister looks and desperate menaces had already struck her with so deep a consternation.

"Young woman," said Melmoth, in his deep hollow voice,—"return to your master, and tell him that his child has been stolen, in order that a vengeance may be consummated! Tell him that the individual who has done this, is the same whom he saw in the sick-ward of Whitechapel workhouse, and whom he was the means of plunging into the mad-cells of that place,—the same whose babe he cheated of the right of burial, and doubtless has preserved as an anatomical curiosity in his own pharmacy! Tell him *this*;—aye—and tell him likewise that he may spare himself all trouble, all expense, and all research in the hope of recovering his child: for those into whose possession that infant has now passed, will keep it as their own even though countless treasures be offered for its restoration! And tell your master also that his son shall be dragged through all the mire and filth of misery—beggary—depravity—and profligacy, until the boy shall have become a proficient in every vice and an adept in every iniquity:—and then—*but not till then*—shall he be sent back to his parents!"

Having thus spoken, and without waiting to observe the effect which the terrible tirade was only too well adapted to produce upon the mind of the horror-stricken woman, Melmoth darted away from her presence and was speedily lost to her view.

CHAPTER CCXXX.

THE LAST MEETING.

It was about noon on the following day, when the Princess Amelia stole forth from her apartment in Windsor Castle and hastened into the park.

Changed—Oh! sadly changed was the appearance of the royal lady since we first introduced her, in all the glow and freshness of her voluptuous beauty, to our readers: and this alteration had occurred within the space of a few short days!

But then what harrowing thoughts—what terrible reflections—what remorseful memories, had been doing the work of desolation!—and what ravenous vultures had been preying upon a heart that was formed to love with such fervid enthusiasm and to palpitate with the gush of such warm impassioned feelings!

How indescribable—how matchless was the woe which had succeeded the dream of bliss wherein the senses of that Princess had been lately steeped! It was not the mere loss of the object of an illimitable love; but it was the idea, ever haunting and ever goading her, that this love which she had known was accursed—this fondness to which she had yielded was an incest. The heart had created a worship which nature now denounced as a blasphemy: the imagination had pictured a heaven where in reality there was a yawning hell.

Henceforth what joy could existence promise for the royal Amelia?—how could she even endure to live? Though gems might glitter upon her brow, her heart would be consuming to ashes: all the light and glory of her rank would only render the darkness of her soul the more appalling. For not only was there her own secret—the stupendous secret of her incestuous love: but there was likewise her father's secret which had become known to her at the same time. Yes—since the dread discovery had been made that Sir Richard Stamford was the King's son by the late unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot, the Princess Amelia had no difficulty in comprehending the secret means of coercion which Tim Meagles and Lady Lade had exercised towards her father on that memorable occasion when she was a listener to the interview at Windsor Castle. Therefore, like a weight of lead upon her soul, lay the conviction that her father—the King of England—must have been a perjured monster towards a too confiding, too affectionate, too yielding woman! Yes—there was no longer any doubt in the mind of Amelia as to the meaning of that document which Meagles had produced on the occasion referred to, and which had exercised so talismanic an effect upon her sire.

Thus the unhappy Princess had not merely her own tremendous grief—aye, her startling, harrowing, though involuntary crime—to goad her to desperation, but she had likewise the knowledge of a father's black iniquity to drive her to madness. A spell seemed to hang over her family—a curse to have settled upon those who were nearest and dearest to her. Her father was tortured by the stings of conscience for the misdeeds of his youth—her eldest brother was a disgusting voluptuary and a heartless seducer—her favourite sister was the mother of an illegitimate child—and in the conduct of no one of her other brothers and sisters had she any reason either to rejoice or to indulge in hope. Miserable, then—most miserable in all respects was the condition of this amiable Princess;—and small marvel was it if the glories of her loveliness were dimmed and the flowers of her youthful beauty fading fast!

Pale and sunken were her cheeks—hollow were her eyes—trembling with a painful nervousness were her limbs: and all these physical changes, so indicative of rapid and premature decay, had been wrought within a few short days! The fountains of her happiness—the basis of her mind's energies—the springs of youthful hope and confidence had been broken up all in a moment;—and the effect of this moral desolation had been terrible indeed in its reaction upon the frame.

But wherefore is she now traversing the park with hasty step?—why has she quitted that chamber the solitude of which she has devised so many pretexts to ensure since the evening of the fatal discovery? Concealed in her dress,—next to that bosom which shall palpitate no more with love's elysian sensations,—is a note containing a few hastily-penned lines from Sir Richard Stamford. In this billet, furtively conveyed to her, the baronet tells Amelia that he has resolved to leave England for ever;—and he beseeches a last interview ere he shall turn his back upon his native land, to re-visit it never!

In the most secluded nook of the spacious park, Sir Richard Stamford was waiting for Amelia. His appearance was also changed—much changed: for the load of grief that lay upon his mind was scarcely

less than that which appeared to be crushing the soul of the unfortunate Princess.

Painful—indescribably painful was their meeting now;—not only painful as an encounter between a brother and a sister may be rendered by circumstances of bitter adversity,—but with an enhanced poignancy because their heart's maddened feelings were mingled with a profound sense of shame.

"We now meet for the last time, Amelia," said the baronet, in a low and tremulous tone. "I thought that you would like to see me once more ere I quit this land for ever——"

"And to what part of the world, Richard, do you intend to repair?" asked the Princess, with downcast eyes and with a faint blush upon her cheeks.

"I know not—I have as yet resolved upon nothing," returned Sir Richard; "unless it be that I am decided to abandon my native country for ever. This is the only resolution which I have formed—and I am certain that you will approve of it."

"I do, I do," said the Princess, with impassioned earnestness: and now she raised her tearful eyes and fixed them with mingled tenderness and shame upon the baronet's countenance. "Yes—you do well to leave a country where you have experienced so much misery, Richard," she continued: "and whithersoever you proceed, may God Almighty's blessing attend upon you!"

"I know that you will often think of me, Amelia—and sometimes pray for me," returned the baronet, in a voice that was profoundly mournful: "and this thought will console me in my voluntary exile. But you, dear Amelia—oh! how can you bear up against the tremendous calamity that has overtaken us?"

"I shall sink beneath its weight, Richard," answered the royal lady: "for it is stronger than all the energies which I could possibly collect to counterbalance it. Day and night am I haunted by the most harrowing reflections: asleep or awake, the memory of the dread past pursues me, and points to a still more dreadful future. For, alas! I have no more hope of happiness in this world: my heart is breaking—all affections and feelings which constitute its vitality, are withered—and the brief remnant of my existence will be deluged in tears."

"Poor girl—too well can I appreciate the bitter, excruciating truth of all you say," returned the baronet, in a deeper despondency than before: "and I feel that it would be a mere mockery of your illimitable woe to proffer the words of consolation. Indeed, I am myself so broken in spirit—all my moral energies are so completely crushed—and I have so profound a sense of my heart's utter desolation, that I could not induce my lips to smile nor my tongue to articulate syllables of sympathy—no, not even to cheer a being so beloved as thou art!"

"Earth has no balm for souls so deeply wounded as ours, Richard," said the Princess, in a voice that was scarcely audible in its low plaintiveness: "and the world has no sympathy that can sooth the spirit which is writhing in the tortures of crucifixion! Oh! if it were not cumulating crime upon crime," she exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of despair, "I would seek refuge in the grave of a suicide."

"For heaven's sake talk not thus, Amelia!" exclaimed the baronet, alarmed and startled by her words and the impassioned energy of desperation with which they were uttered. "Come—give me your arm—and we will walk together for the last time. We must not say farewell until our souls are at least more tranquil and resigned."

"Pardon me, Richard, if I said aught to terrify you," observed the Princess, in a tone of plaintive entreaty, as she took the baronet's arm: "but you can understand how miserable—how very, very miserable I am!"—and her voice was lost in the sobs that almost choked her.

"You ere now used the word *crime*, Amelia," said Sir Richard Stamford; "and you were wrong! Yes—for *you* are not criminal, poor suffering girl!—*you* are not guilty, my well-beloved sister! In ignorance you loved me—in unconsciousness of the secret tie which bound us together, you gave me your heart. Nature's whisperings were not loud enough to carry an efficient warning to our souls; and therefore thou canst not blame thyself!"

"Would to God that I could reason in the same manner!" cried the Princess: then instantly checking the sudden impetuosity to which she had for a moment given way, and recovering her self-possession, she said, "There is a man near yonder trees, who appears to be watching us."

"No—it cannot be," returned the baronet. "Wherefore should he watch us?—and who could have set a spy upon our actions? But we will walk leisurely that way and assure ourselves upon the point."

"A vague and terrible presentiment of evil has just come over me," said the Princess: and Sir Richard felt her hand tremble as it rested lightly upon his arm.

"'Tis because your nerves are unstrung—your energies so cruelly shaken," he remarked, as he led her gently along: and yet the words which she had last uttered infused a vague and unknown terror into his own soul, as if he had caught the infection of that evil presentiment which the Princess already experienced.

"That man is assuredly watching us," she said, in a tone of increasing alarm. "Let us retrace our way."

"On the contrary," observed Sir Richard Stamford: "if he be really espying our movements, we must know what he is and who has employed him. I could not bear the thought of leaving England if it were to abandon you, Amelia, to any danger. Come—take courage—we are close by the knot of trees where he is stationed——"

"Ah! now he issues forth from his hiding-place," said the Princess; "and he seems to take no notice of us. I was foolish to give way to such idle terrors: but when the mind is labouring under the influence of a deep despondency, it converts the most trivial incidents into a cause of alarm."

Sir Richard Stamford made no reply to this observation, because he and the Princess were now within a few yards of the individual whose presence had filled them with such sinister apprehensions. The man, having emerged from behind the clump of trees, was apparently gazing with intentness in a direction exactly opposite to that whence Amelia and the baronet were thus advancing;—and the nearer they drew towards him, the more did they feel convinced that their alarms had been groundless.

But all in a moment, the man turned and faced them;—and ere the eye had time to wink, he dis-

charged a pistol point-blank at Sir Richard Stamford.

A piercing shriek thrilled from the lips of Amelia —and a cry of mortal agony burst from those of the baronet as he started back and fell heavily upon the ground. The Princess threw herself upon her knees by his side: and at the same moment there was the report of a second pistol.

Wild with terror, and in the belief that this latter weapon was aimed at herself, she cast her frightened looks towards the assassin: but there was no cause for alarm on her own account—the man lay stone dead at a little distance!

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Ten minutes afterwards a park-keeper, who happened to pass that way, was horrified at the spectacle which met his view.

On the ground lay a man weltering in his blood, and with his head horribly shattered in such a manner that it was easy to perceive he had placed the muzzle of a pistol in his mouth and blown his brains out.

At a little distance a lady was stretched by the side of a gentleman the bosom of whose shirt was saturated with blood. He was quite dead, having received a mortal wound in the breast: but the lady, whom the park-keeper in dismay recognised to be the Princess Amelia, was only in a deep swoon.

Assistance was procured from the Castle, whither the unconscious lady was speedily removed;—and on regaining her senses, she awoke to the full horror of all the frightful recollections which poured into her maddening brain.

The particulars of so awful a tragedy could not be entirely hushed up: but at the inquest which was held upon the two bodies, the circumstance that the Princess Amelia was present when the murder and the suicide took place, was carefully suppressed. To the world the tale went forth that Sir Richard Stamford was assassinated in Windsor Park by some man who was altogether unknown, and who put a period to his own existence immediately after the perpetration of the mysterious deed. Upon the person of the assassin-suicide nothing was found to show who he was; and his features were so completely disfigured by the means he had adopted to ensure self-destruction, that no description could be given of his countenance so as to lead to his identification.

The remains of the baronet were interred in the parish church at Windsor; and the corpse of his murderer was buried by night in a neighbouring cross-road, without the performance of Christian rites.

To the reader the tragic occurrence is no doubt easy of solution. The assassin-suicide was James Melmoth;—and the strong resemblance which existed between Sir Richard Stamford and the Prince of Wales, had led the monster-man to mistake the unfortunate baronet for the heir-apparent to the British throne.

CHAPTER CCXXXI.

THE SNAKE WITH THE LOVELY SKIN.

It was on the same day and about the same hour when the tragedy took place in Windsor Park, that Lord and Lady Holderness were engaged in deep consultation together at their mansion in Cavendish Square.

They were seated together upon a sofa in the drawing-room; and Fernanda held a newspaper in her hand. Her countenance expressed mingled hardihood and triumph: but on the features of her husband might be traced a certain degree of uneasiness which he was evidently struggling to subdue. For the nobleman was afraid of his young, fiery, and impetuous wife: he dreaded her scorn and contempt even more than he feared her anger and her revilings;—and having suffered her to plunge him into the deepest abysm of turpitude, he clung to her as it were with a childish reliance for solace and reassurance amidst the terrors that haunted him night and day.

"Well, Walter, are you not satisfied with my reasoning?" she suddenly exclaimed, after a long pause: and as she spoke, she bent her violet eyes upon her husband with an expression of mingled annoyance and contemptuous pity. "Your countenance is still gloomy—there is uneasiness depicted upon your features ——"

"Do not upbraid me, Fernanda," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a voice of earnest entreaty. "I cannot help it if I still experience some little nervousness: but in a few days—when the storm has completely blown over—you shall find me as gay and happy again as ever I can possibly be in this world."

"Why do you persist in speaking of a storm?" demanded Fernanda, impatiently.

"Well, my dear—I meant to say that so soon as every incident which can possibly menace us, shall have passed, my apprehensions will cease altogether," answered the nobleman.

"I do not doubt it," said Fernanda, with a laconic contemptuousness. "In plain terms, you mean me to understand that when there is no danger you will fear none. This is the very acme of moral courage, Walter—and I congratulate you upon your bravery."

"Wherefore indulge in this cruel irony, Fernanda?" exclaimed Lord Holderness. "I deserve better treatment at your hands: for I plunged my soul in crime to save you from danger——"

"And to forward your own interests likewise," added the lady, in a sharp tone of rebuke.

"What object could I have had in aiding you to take the life of the old woman in Fore Street?" demanded the nobleman, with a scintillation of that spirit which Fernanda's domineering treatment had well nigh crushed altogether.

"Had you no interest in saving your wife from the chances of a fearful exposure and an ignominious death?" exclaimed Fernanda, her eyes lighting up and her cheeks flushing with indignation.

"Yes—to be sure," stammered Lord Holderness, as he gazed with mingled ardour and timidity upon that woman whose beauty was so dazzling and whose soul was so black, and who indeed might so well be likened to the most venomous of snakes with the loveliest of skins.

"And in putting Dudley to death," she continued, in a lower and softer tone, as she perceived that her looks had both overawed and fascinated her husband,—"did we not serve a double purpose, by

removing a man who was acquainted with secrets the revelation of which would have proved my destruction—and also by the accomplishment of a crime which circumstantial evidence fixed upon Arthur Eaton?"

"True, true!" ejaculated the nobleman. "But what if all that evidence should turn against ourselves to-morrow, when young Eaton stands in the dock at the Old Bailey?"

"I have already shown you the impossibility—or at least the improbability of such a catastrophe," said Fernanda. "This newspaper," she continued, pointing towards a particular column in the journal which she held in her hand, "contains the welcome tidings of Caroline Walters' death: and when that young woman breathed her last yesterday in Newgate, the only being whose malignity or whose revelations we had cause to fear, ceased to exist."

"But suppose that Caroline and Arthur Eaton have encountered each other in Newgate?" said Lord Holderness. "Depend upon it, Arthur has his suspicions relative to yourself, if not with regard to me: and if Miss Walters has told him all she knew or suspected——"

"It is by no means probable that they met," interrupted Fernanda, an expression of uneasiness now glittering for a moment in her eyes. "At all events," she continued, with the resolution of one who was determined not to meet apprehensions half way, but rather to discourage the slightest concession to the influence of such fears,—"at all events, if such an encounter had taken place in prison between Arthur Eaton and Caroline Walters, the newspaper would have most likely made some mention of the circumstance: or else," she added, in a lower tone, and with a sudden darkening of the looks, "we should have been already arrested!"

"And we shall not be safe until *after* the trial of young Eaton," said Lord Holderness, now shuddering visibly: for that transitory terror on his wife's part was not lost upon him—and he failed not to catch its infection. "I wish to heaven we were two days older!"

"In two days," observed Lady Holderness, with a solemnity of tone and manner not very usual with her, "we shall be either safe and happy—or else dead!"

"Dead!" echoed her husband, with a spasmodic start; "what mean you, Fernanda?"

"I mean," she responded, "that if anything should transpire to menace our safety and threaten an exposure, we will anticipate our doom——"

"By suicide?" murmured her husband, with the deep voice and the shuddering look of concentrated horror.

"To be sure!" ejaculated Fernanda. "Should you shrink from such a course?—or do you prefer death upon the scaffold?"

"My God! what alternatives!" cried the wretched nobleman, trembling from head to foot, and his naturally sallow countenance becoming absolutely ghastly. "But you do not think that there is any danger, Fernanda?" he said, with all the grovelling meanness of a coward disposition that seeks to imbibe the inspiration of confidence and courage from the assurances of a bolder and more daring spirit:—"you have told me that there is nothing to fear—and yet you yourself are not altogether free from alarm? Oh! speak candidly—frankly,—and say whether you think Arthur Eaton will be able to rebut the charge of a double murder and fix the appalling accusation upon us?"

"I have already assured you of my belief in our safety," responded Fernanda: "but I must candidly confess, since you yourself have offered the suggestion, that much—if not everything—depends upon whether Caroline Walters had any communication with Arthur Eaton before her death. The affair of the knife is the most damnatory point in the evidence against Arthur; and if the case remains just as it was when he was committed for trial, his condemnation is certain."

"But may he not offer some explanatory suggestions relative to the incident of the knife?" asked Lord Holderness, whose conscience rendered his imagination poignantly active in conjuring up fresh sources of terror. "Or suppose, for instance, that the cutler of whom I purchased that knife should happen to come forward ——"

"How can he, unless sought after?" exclaimed Fernanda. "Besides, did you not choose a knife which happened to have no maker's name upon either blade?"

"True," observed Lord Holderness. "There is however another point which troubles me in connexion with the affair of the knife."

"What is it?" demanded Fernanda, abruptly.

"I mean," responded her husband,—"that is, I fear that Arthur Eaton will be enabled to give a feasible explanation relative to the incident. During the period of his incarceration he has had ample leisure to collect his ideas and concentrate all his reminiscences; and he will not fail to recollect that visit which you and I paid him in Hanover Square immediately after our marriage."

"He cannot well have forgotten it," observed Lady Holderness.

"No—and therefore he will call to mind the fact that while you remained alone with him for a short space," continued the nobleman, "I found a pretext for retiring to the library;—and it cannot possibly fail to strike him how easy it was for me to slip up to his own bed-chamber and conceal in the drawer that blade which I had previously and purposely broken off from the knife. Then, if this proceeding on my part be suspected, it will require no ghost to suggest that the same hand which dropped the blade into the drawer also scratched the initials '*W. D.*' upon the handle of the weapon——"

"Really, you are allowing your terrors to travel too fast and much too far, Walter," exclaimed Lady Holderness, rising from her seat. "You are pusillanimous to a degree——"

At this moment a domestic entered the apartment to announce that "a man who was waiting in the hall, desired to speak immediately to Lord and Lady Holderness."

"Show him up into this room," said Fernanda, without losing a tittle of her self-possession or even changing colour.

The domestic withdrew;—and Lady Holderness, turning towards her husband, saw that he was white as a sheet and trembling from head to foot.

"Go into that room, Walter," she said, in an imperious tone, as if speaking to a child: and as she pushed him into an adjoining apartment, with which there was a communication by means of folding-doors, she observed, "If any danger be menacing us, we shall know how to act: but if a mere suspicion be alone existing against us, your looks would confirm it."

Then, having shut the door upon her husband, who was already half dead with terror, she hastened to the window and glanced into the Square. An ill-looking man was stationed opposite the house——another was loitering at a short distance—and a third was leaning against a lamp-post a little farther off still.

Fernanda turned away from the window with a fearful tightening of the heart-strings and with a hideous pang shooting through her brain: for she felt convinced that her own hopes of security and triumph were destroyed and that her husband's presentient terrors were but too well founded. It was however with a strong and almost incredible effort that this woman, so daring in crime and so courageous in the presence of danger, recovered her self-possession as she advanced to meet the man whom the domestic was now ushering into the apartment.

"What is your business?" she asked, motioning the servant to withdraw: and her voice trembled not—neither did her limbs, although an ice-chill fastened upon her heart's core as she met the sinister gaze of the visitor whose very look denoted the officer of justice.

"I want to speak to your ladyship on a very particular matter," said the man: "but Lord Holderness must be present—if he happens to be at home——"

"Did not the servant tell you that his lordship was within?" inquired Fernanda.

"Why, yes, my lady—the hall-porter said so," returned Crawley, the Bow Street Officer—for he indeed it was: but the lady's extraordinary self-possession, so inconsistent with conscious guilt and so far beyond the usual power of hypocritical assumption, perfectly staggered the man despite of all his experience.

"And what is the nature of the business that has brought you hither?" demanded Lady Holderness, with a dignified courtesy that was in admirable keeping with her rank.

"To tell your ladyship the truth," replied Crawley, "it's not a very pleasant business any way: but I'd rather explain it in the presence of his lordship, whom I want to see as well as yourself."

"Sit down for a moment," said Fernanda, pointing to a chair: "and I will fetch Lord Holderness."

Then, without any visible excitement, she passed into the back drawing-room, closing the leaf of the folding-doors behind her.

Her husband, who had listened at those doors to the brief dialogue which took place between Fernanda and the constable, seemed now to be armed with the courage of desperation;—and the intrepid woman was both amazed and rejoiced,—if joy she could possibly experience under such circumstances,—at this change which had been wrought in him at the supreme moment.

"All is lost!" she said, in a low whisper, as she took his hand and pressed it in token of satisfaction at his altered demeanour.

"I know it, Fernanda," responded Lord Holderness, with firm but hollow accents. "I listened——"

"And you heard enough to convince you that this man is a constable?" added the lady. "I can tell you more—and that is, there are other officers in the Square. Our arrest has been resolved upon!"

"Let us die, Fernanda—let us die!" said the nobleman, clasping his hands in a sudden access of despairing horror. "Oh! my poor children—my orphan, neglected, ill-used daughters——"

"Yield not yourself up to vain lamentations, Walter," interrupted his wife, in a stern tone. "Every instant is precious——"

"Yes, yes!" murmured Lord Holderness: "we must die now to avoid a more dreadful fate a few weeks later! But the means—the means?"

"Here!" said Fernanda, producing *two* small phials from her bosom. "I have all along been prepared for the worst—and in providing for myself I was not selfish enough to forget you!"

"One last embrace, Fernanda—one last kiss!" said the nobleman in a voice that was scarcely audible, as he took the phial which she proffered him. "Oh! if you had never tempted me to evil, how happy we might be together: for now that I am about to surrender you to the cold embraces of death, you appear more lovely in my eyes than ever you were before—lovely though you have always seemed!"

And snatching to his breast that snake with the charming skin, he covered her countenance with kisses.

But disengaging herself from his arms, she said, while the fever of a strong excitement burnt in her eyes and glowed upon her cheeks, "Now, Walter—now! Let us court death while we have the courage!"—and she seated herself upon a sofa, while her husband took his place by her side.

"We will drink together, Fernanda," whispered Lord Holderness, whom his wife's dauntless example armed with an intrepidity equal to the fearful occasion.

And with their eyes fixed upon each other, they placed the phials to their lips.

In the adjacent room Mr. Crawley was anxiously awaiting the return of Lady Holderness in company with her husband, both of whom he was prepared to take into custody,—when he was suddenly startled by hearing some object fall heavily in the adjoining apartment.

It fell like a human being—with the dull, dead sound which no other thing on earth sends forth when falling;—and a suspicion that all was not right flashed through the brain of the constable.

Springing from his seat, he rushed to the folding-doors—burst them open—and precipitated himself into the apartment.

There what a spectacle met his eyes! Upon the sofa lay Fernanda, her head hanging over the side, and her form without the least quivering of vitality left;—and, close by, her husband was stretched on the carpet, also stone dead!

The empty phials bore testimony to the fact that some potent poison had served as the means of self-destruction;—and such indeed was the last use that the guilty Fernanda made of the *Heir's Friend*.

CONCLUSION.

On the following day the Honourable Arthur Eaton was placed upon his trial at the Old Bailey: but the proceedings now assumed a complexion altogether different from that which they had worn when under investigation by the magistrate at Bow Street. The counsel for the prisoner entered into a full and complete detail of his client's former connexion with Fernanda,—how he had seduced her, and how her vengeance had adopted such a dark and subtle course in the hope of sending him slowly, and silently, but surely to the tomb,—how he had discovered the receipts of the poison and the antidote at the midwife's house, and how Mr. Bradford the eminent chemist had ana-

lysed them, — how he had detected and pardoned William Dudley,—and how Fernanda, after she became Lady Holderness, had called upon him at his father's house in Hanover Square and proposed utter oblivion of the past, with friendship for the future. The learned counsel for the prisoner then touched upon the acquaintance which the late Caroline Walters had formed with Fernanda, at the midwife's dwelling in Fore Street: and this matter he especially introduced in order to show that Fernanda had been an accomplice in the murder of her own child. He next proceeded to explain the strong inducements which Fernanda naturally had to make away with William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley;—and he concluded by observing that the suicide of Lord and Lady Holderness was a sufficient proof of their joint guilt in respect to the double murder with which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had been hitherto charged. The learned counsel then called Mr. Bradford, who deposed to the analysis of the poison and the antidote; and also a cutler, who identified the knife with the broken blade as one which he had sold to a gentleman whom he described, and who from that description was evidently the late Lord Holderness. The counsel for the prosecution declined to carry the case any farther; and the Honourable Arthur Eaton was at once acquitted.

We should here observe that no mention was made of the conversation between Carrotty Poll, the Big Beggarman, and the Magsman, which Caroline Walters had overheard in Newgate, and which she had communicated to Arthur Eaton: for not only were the matters involved in that discourse altogether foreign to the case of the young gentleman himself, but he was likewise unwilling to have anything adduced that might blacken the memory of Fernanda more deeply than it was already stained.

When Arthur's trial was concluded, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were placed in the dock, charged with murder and piracy. Watkins and Bradley, who served with the prisoners on board the *Royal George*, were admitted as King's evidence; and to their testimony was superadded that of Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Fire-Fly*. The charges were fully made out by these witnesses; and the two villains were sentenced to be hanged at Execution Dock. But the culprits made light of the judgment thus recorded against them: for they felt assured that through the written undertaking of the Prince of Wales, which Carrotty Poll had in her possession, their lives would be spared.

The reader will perhaps recollect that Caroline Walters had penned a hasty note to Mr. Rigden, acquainting him with the fact that the boy Alfred, who had stolen the Florimel papers, was employed by a woman named Price, who kept a low public-house in Horslydown. Now the attorney was not a man to suffer any injury which he received to go unavenged; and he was particularly inveterate against the double-faced youth who had so completely succeeded in outwitting him. Accordingly, after instituting certain inquiries relative to the woman Price and her public-house, he went to Bow Street and laid a complaint to the effect that the boy Alfred, being incited by certain persons who dwelt at or infested the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown, had plundered him of a considerable sum of money. This allegation was of course untrue: but Mr. Rigden did not think it quite prudent to say anything about a packet of deeds which he himself had originally obtained in so sinister a manner. Upon the representation which he made, warrants were issued against the boy Alfred and Mary Price; and Mr. Crawley was entrusted with the execution of them. Accordingly, in the evening of the day on which the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were tried at the Old Bailey, the Bow Street runners made an incursion into Horslydown, and took the Beggar's Staff by storm. Carrotty Poll and the boy Alfred were arrested; and a number of persons who had long been "wanted" by the authorities for various matters, were found in the house at the time and taken into custody. These were the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand. The premises were moreover searched from bottom to top; and considerable quantities of stolen property were discovered. But amongst the various articles which fell into Mr. Crawley's hands upon this occasion, was the document signed by the Prince of Wales and guaranteeing their lives to Joseph Warren and Stephen Price!

Nothing could exceed the rage and despair of the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll at this misadventure: but their tears and their threats were alike unavailing;—and the whole posse of prisoners who were thus arrested at the Beggar's Staff were conveyed to prison.

That very same evening the document was restored to the Prince of Wales;—and a few weeks afterwards Mr. Crawley was appointed governor of a gaol in some distant part of the country, with a salary of three hundred pounds a-year.

But here we must observe that on the same evening when the incursion was made by the constables into Horslydown, a frightful occurrence took place in Grafton Street. A nobleman who lived next door to Earl Montgomery gave a grand entertainment: and as Eugene was returning home from a visit which he had been paying to Lady Bellenden at the Priory, he observed a respectably-dressed youth lurking about exactly opposite the mansion whence emanated the soft sounds of music and the beams of roseate light. The Earl thought nothing of it at the moment—especially as his mind was filled with the suicide of his cousin Fernanda and her husband. But happening to look forth from his parlour-window twenty minutes or half-an-hour afterwards, he still saw the same boy loitering in front of his noble neighbour's mansion; and, now entertaining a suspicion that the youth had some evil intent, he issued forth and demanded why he was lurking in that vicinage. The boy was seized with confusion and endeavoured to conceal in his jacket-pocket some object which he had just before been holding in his hand. Montgomery caught him by the arm and insisted on knowing what it was that he thus endeavoured to hide: but the boy struggled to release himself—and in the brief scuffle the object fell from about his person. There was a smash of glass upon the pavement, instantaneously followed by a terrific explosion which shattered the windows of the adjacent houses. Forth ran the affrighted guests from the mansion where the entertainment was taking place,—forth also ran the servants from Lord Montgomery's abode. And awful was the sight that met their view! The Earl and the boy were stretched lifeless upon the pavement—their countenances disfigured, their bodies bleeding from innumerable wounds. They were conveyed indoors and medical assistance was promptly obtained: but all human succour was unavailing — and thus perished Earl Montgomery, together with the son of the monster-man!

Joseph Warren and Stephen Price found themselves, within a few hours after their condemnation, deprived of all hope and all resource. The document on which they had relied, was no longer at their disposal: Fernanda and Earl Montgomery, whose intervention in their behalf they might have ensured by means of threats, were no more.

The two villains accordingly resigned themselves to their fate, and suffered the last penalty of the law at Execution Dock.

The posse of prisoners whom Crawley arrested at the Beggar's Staff, were respectively condemned to various periods of incarceration, according to the offences which they had committed; and Mr. Rigden, having *substantiated by oath* the charge which he had made against Alfred, had the satisfaction of getting the boy sentenced to a couple of years' imprisonment along with the rest. As for Mr. Rigden himself, he

flourished to the end of his days, as most roguish attorneys are certain to do.

The Kinchin-Ken was not broken up because the Grand was removed for a time from the sphere of his dominion: but Shickster Sal and Old Bloak continued to profit by the depredations and thefts committed by the juvenile tribe, amongst whom Melmoth's two survlving children in time attained to a considerable degree of celebrity. The baby stolen from Thurston's nurse was entrusted to the special care of Shickster Sal, who failed not to rear the unfortunate being in all the demoralization of the Kinchin-Ken: and thus was the illicit offspring of Royalty trained from its very infancy amongst beggars, thieves, and prostitutes!

The reader will remember that, in pursuance of a diabolically concerted plan between the Prince of Wales and Mr. Page, certain noble French refugees—namely, the Marquises of St. Croix and Bellois, and the Duke of Villebelle—were induced to repair to France in the hope of finding the Vendeans ready to unfold the banner of a royalist insurrection. But the Prince caused a private intimation of the circumstance to be given to the French government; and the betrayed refugees, on setting foot in La Vendée, were arrested, tried, and put to death! By this infernal treachery, the heir-apparent to the British throne evaded the repayment of the money which he had borrowed from the Marquis de Saint Croix—retained possession of the funds deposited in his hands by the Duke de Villebelle—and avenged himself upon the Marquis de Bellois in respect to this nobleman's amour with Mrs. Fitzherbert.

The unfortunate Villebelle had confided, through the agency of Mr. Page, no less than forty thousand pounds to the keeping of the Prince. This was precisely the sum which his Royal Highness had to pay Mr. Meagles: namely, twenty thousand in settlement of the guarantee given at Stamford Manor—and a similar amount in liquidation of the I. O. U. which Lord Desborough had presented to Tim on the same occasion. Thus enriched, our sporting friend was enabled to cut a fine figure at the West End; and in due course it was announced in the newspapers that Mr. Meagles had laid claim to the dormant Marquisate of Edgemore. The matter was brought before the House of Lords: no opposition was offered—and, behold! the dashing, gay, and unprincipled Tim became elevated to the peerage. He soon afterwards married Lady Lade; and the remainder of their days were passed happily enough.

The services which Mr. Page rendered the Prince of Wales in divers and sundry ways, were rewarded with an income of two hundred a-year, but the payment of which was made conditional on the ex-bagman's betaking himself to some town at least a hundred miles distant from the metropolis. This was no great hardship to Mr. Page: and he accordingly fixed his habitation at Bath, where he managed to thrust himself and his wife into what is called "tolerably good society."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, was acquitted of the charge of complicity in the murder of Grumley: but the constitution of the poor creature had suffered so severe a shock, that she died soon after her release from Newgate.

The Marchioness of Bellenden lived to a good old age, retaining her widow's weeds and pursuing her covert debaucheries unto the end. In this voluptuous career she continued to be assisted by her confidante Margaret, and also by two men-servants who had long been in the secret of her dissolute life and who indeed were her paramours as well as her domestics. These individuals—Richard and Mason—have already been alluded to in the course of our narrative: they were both tall, handsome men—and their discretion, being liberally rewarded, helped to throw the veil of hypocrisy over the debaucheries of their mistress.

The Dowager-Countess Montgomery did not long survive the death of her elder son: she perished of a broken heart—and a marble monument in a church at the West End ascribes to her ladyship a thousand virtues, not one of which she ever possessed.

The Countess of Desborough survived her husband, the ill-fated Earl, about seven years, which period she passed in a secluded manner at her town-residence in Berkeley Square. Her beauty faded rapidly—she wasted and pined away, beneath the influence of a crushing remorse;—and at the time of her death, rumour declared "that her ladyship's last hours were rendered terrible and agonising to a degree by the phantoms which her disordered imagination conjured up." It was likewise stated "that amongst the dreadful delusions which haunted her, was the belief that she had committed a murder; and that she died with the name of *Ramsey* upon her lips!" Oh! little deemed they who witnessed Eleanor's death-bed, how sternly real were the harrowing images which floated in her mind, but which were thus supposed to be the hallucinations of a disordered fancy!

The suicide of Lord Holderness and the dark tales attached thereto, were a terrible blow for poor Pauline, and likewise for Octavia, from whom it was impossible to keep the fatal event concealed. But thanks to the generous care of Florimel and Arthur Eaton, the sad tidings were broken as delicately as possible to Pauline in the first instance, and by this amiable young lady to her afflicted sister afterwards. We shall not pause to describe their grief: suffice it to say that it would have been overwhelming, were it not for the unwearied attentions and assiduities of Gabriel and Arthur.

Octavia became the mother of a female child—the fruit of her amour with the Prince of Wales: and by degrees, as she recovered from her confinement, her reason returned altogether and her mind regained its pristine strength, although its buoyant freshness had fled for ever. In due time she listened to the honourable proposals which the Honourable Arthur Eaton made to her: for, although the sad story of her first love and her shame was *now* known to him, he generously renewed that offer which had formerly been rejected. Accordingly, about eighteen months after the death of her father Lord Holderness, Octavia Clarendon became the wife of the Honourable Arthur Eaton: and on the same day Pauline bestowed her hand upon Lord Florimel.

About the same time Rose Foster accompanied George Woodfall to the altar: and the Marchioness of Bellenden, who never omitted any opportunity of sustaining her reputation for benevolence as well as piety, presented the bride with a dowry of five thousand pounds upon the wedding day. The young artist, having some time previously thrown off the yoke of Mr. Shrubsole the picture-dealer, was already rising in reputation at the period of his marriage; and in a few years he achieved the celebrity of one of the greatest painters of the age.

We have now brought the *First Series* of the MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON to a conclusion. But though the curtain has fallen upon the career of most of the characters who have been figuring upon the stage of our narrative, there are still some the thread of whose history it is our purpose to take up and entertwine with the incidents of another tale. The catalogue of the amours of the voluptuary George is not exhausted: while the wrongs, the persecutions, and the trials of his hapless wife, Caroline of Brunswick, remain to be delineated. The materials which we possess for our forthcoming labours will afford scope for even a deeper and more absorbing interest than that which has characterised any previous work of our's: and confident in our ability to realise this promise to its fullest extent, we now invite the attention of our readers to the *Second Series* of the MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON.

END OF THE FIRST SERIES.

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